KRISHNAVATARA VI

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THE BOOK OF VEDA VYAASA THE MASTER

K.M.MUNSHI

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ABOUT THE BOOK

Shri Krishna!—what a name to conjure with! Every mother or father of a child, every boy or girl who has a playmate, every lover who has a beloved, every soldier who has an enemy to fight, every king who has a political opponent, every aspirant who has a spiritual goal, every *yogi* who seeks *kaivalya*—every one in India—thinks of Shri Krishna as *the* perfection. Hindu life is woven with the memory of Shri Krishna and with Truth, Love and Beauty he stands for.

Krishna literature has grown since it first took definite shape in *Mahabharata,* then in *Harivamsha* and *Vishnu Purana,* and was elaborated in *Shrimad Bhagavata* and other Puranas. To this literature in Sanskrit has been added other literature, for the story of his life has been told in epic, song and story by thousands of poets in every Indian language for centuries. In the course of being so told, Shri Krishna has come to be invested with traits and credited with exploits of such divergent nature that it becomes difficult, if not impossible, for a reader to have a clear picture of the Krishna as he was known by his contemporaries.

In making this attempt to divest his personality of later accretions, Munshi has sifted the available Krishna literature in Sanskrit to find the Krishna as he *must* have lived. Then, with the aid of his creative imagination, he has woven the essential events of his life with romance, to present in this work, Shri Krishna at once as a man, a superman and God. What was, according to *Bhagavata,* the story of God who had come to the world as man, has become, in Munshiji's hands, the fascinating story of a man who became God.

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KRISHNAVATARA

Volume VI

THE BOOK OF VYAASA, THE MASTER

By

K. M. MUNSHI

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BANARAS

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INTRODUCTION

Who has not heard of Sri Krishna who delivered the message of the *Bhagavad Gita* and whom the *Bhagavata* calls 'God Himself'?

From the earliest days that my memories can go back to, Sri Krishna has been, in a sense, dominating my imagination. In my childhood, I heard his adventures with breathless amazement. Since then I have read of him, sung of him, admired him, worshipped him in a hundred temples and every year on his birthday at home. And day after day, for years and years, his message has been the strength of my life.

Unfortunately, his fascinating personality, which could be glimpsed in what may be called the original *Mahabharata*, has been overlaid with legends, myths, miracles and adorations for about three thousand years.

Wise and valorous, he was loving and loved, far-seeing and yet living for the moment, gifted with sage-like detachment and yet intensely human; the diplomat, the sage and the man of action with a personality as luminous as that of a divinity.

The urge, therefore, came upon me, time and again, to embark upon a reconstruction of his life and adventures by weaving a romance around him.

It was an impossible venture, but like hundreds of authors in all parts of India for centuries, I could not help offering him whatever little of imagination and creative power I possessed, feeble though they were.

I have called the whole work *Krishnavatara*, *The Descent of the Lord*. The First Part, which ends with the death of Kamsa, has been named *The Magic Flute*, for it deals with his boyhood associated with the flute, which hypnotised men, animals and birds alike, sung with such loving tenderness by innumerable poets.

The Second Part, which ends with Rukmini Haran, is entitled *The Wrath of an Emperor*, as the central theme is the successful defiance by Sri Krishna of Jarasandha, the Emperor of Magadha.

The Third Part is entitled *The Five Brothers* and ends with Draupadi's Swayamvara. The Fourth Part is entitled *The Book of Bhima*, the Fifth Part *The Book of Satyabhaama*, the Sixth

Part *The Book of Vyaasa, the Master*, and the Seventh Part, *The Book of Yudhishthira.*

I hope to carry forward the series till the episode when, on the battle-field of Kurukshetra, Krishna reveals himself as the Eternal Guardian of the Cosmic Law—*Saashvata Dharma Gopta* —to Arjuna, if it is His will that I should do so.

I have followed the technique since 1922 to reconstruct the episodes connected with Chyavana and Sukanya in *Purandara Parajaya* (a play), Agastya and Lopamudra, Vasishta and Vishwamitra, Parashurama and Sahasrarjuna in *Vishvaratha* (a romance), *Deve Didheli* (a play), *Vishwamitra Rishi* (a play), *Lomaharshini* (a romance) and *Bhagavan Parashurama* (a romance), and now Sri Krishna and the heroes and heroines of *Mahabharata* in these volumes of *Krishnavatara.*

Time and again, I have made it clear that none of these works is an English rendering of any old Purana.

In reconstructing Sri Krishna's life and adventures, I had, like many of my predecessors, to reconstruct the episodes inherited from the past, so as to bring out his character, attitude and outlook with the personality-sustained technique of modern romance. I had also had to give flesh and blood to various obscure characters referred to in the *Mahabharata.*

In the course of this adventure, I had often to depart from the legend and myth, for such reconstruction by a modern author must necessarily involve the exercise of whatever little imagination he has. I trust He will forgive me for the liberty I am taking, but must write of Him as I see Him in my imagination.

Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan,
Chowpatty Road, Bombay-7.
January 26, 1971

K. M. MUNSHI

FOREWORD

This work, *The Book of Vyaasa, the Master*, should have been the prologue to the whole of the *Krishnavatara* series.

As I struggled with the reconstruction of Sri Krishna's life recorded in the Epic and the Puranas, I felt that its background, represented by the life span of the sage Veda Vyaasa, was a necessary prologue to Sri Krishna's life and achievements.

The *Mahabharata* refers briefly to the birth of Dvaipaayana Vyaasa. He emerges about sixty years later as a highly revered sage, the redactor of the Vedas, the embodiment of *dharma*, whose advice was sought by the Kuru elders and the Pandavas.

I therefore had to reconstruct this period from whatever material I could gather, however scarce.

Vyaasa survived the Bharata war and is considered to be the author of the original *Mahabharata*, on which, with interpolations and additions, the present structure of the Epic rests.

The Puranic literature also attributes most of the *Puranas* to Vyaasa and contains fragmentary references to some events in his life, sometimes of a very contradictory nature. However, on the whole, he was accepted during his lifetime as the 'Master' (Swami), the great architect of *Dharma*.

These references are all silent as to how he came to attain the position he did when he emerged in the world of the Epic.

The *Shrauta* literature reflects a struggle between the school of *Trayi Vidya*, — Rig, Yajur and Sama— on the one hand and of the Atharvana-Angiras on the other.

The *Trayi Vidya* school looked upon the Atharvana school with contempt because its lore, among other things, included sorcery (*Yatu Vidya*), medicinal practices (*Bhishag Karmani*) and state-craft (*Raj Karmani*). The Atharvana rishis appear to have been denied the office of *Brahmaa*, one of the four principal ritualists at the sacrifices.

Evidently this schism ended in favour of the Atharvanas. Their sacred chants were accepted as an integral part of the Vedas and the Atharvana-Angiras rishis were accorded the status of *Brahmaa* at the sacrifices, though they were barred from reciting Atharvana *mantras* at the sacrifice.

The *Puranas* give the *guru-shishya* origin of Veda Vyaasa. According to them, when Vyaasa organized the schools of Vedic lore, the Atharvana lore had won a place in the *Shrauta* rituals, and Sumantu was Vyaasa's first disciple of the Atharvana school.

The second important thing which can be attributed to Veda Vyaasa is the standardisation of the WORD, the order and the accents of every *mantra*— a standardisation which has come down to us intact from 3000 years ago.

The *Skanda Purana* records a conversation between Vatikaa, Vyaasa's wife, the daughter of rishi Jaabaali and her son, Sukdev, in which she tries to persuade the latter of the need for *grahasthashrama*, the founding of a home as a stage in a dedicated life.

Sukdev is traditionally believed to have been a *Sannyasi*. However, according to several *Puranas*, *Hari Vamsa* and *Devi Bhagvat*, he was married and had children. According to *Devi Bhagvat*, his wife was named Peevaree, by whom he had four sons and one daughter.

The establishment of the Order of *Sannyasis*, which is traditionally accepted to have been founded by Sukdev under the inspiration of his father, Veda Vyaasa himself, has been the firm foundation of *Sanatana dharma* for well-nigh 30 centuries. Adi Sankaracharya re-organized the Order under the name of Dashanami Sampradaya.

There is no reason to doubt that Vyaasa was the founder of the Order of *Sannyasis*, which has done and is doing so much to preserve the inspiration of *sanatana dharma* and present its spiritual heritage to India and nations abroad.

Sannyasis like Dayanand and Vivekananda and even Ramakrishna Paramahamsa and hundreds of others, who have been keeping the flame of Sanatana Dharma alive in modern times, belong to this Order.

Throughout the *Mahabharata*, Vyaasa advises those in difficulties to go and take their bath at the sacred *teerthas* and purify themselves. The *teertha* cult, so unique, has preserved the unity of our country and the consciousness of the country's being one. Veda Vyaasa appears to be the founder of this cult. At any rate, it was he who emphasised the sanctity of the *teerthas* by attributing purificatory power to them.

The social structure, the four-fold order of society—Brahmanas, Kshatriyas, Vaisyas and Sudras—was in the process of being institutionalised in Veda Vyaasa's lifetime. It was not a rigid social system.

Vasishtha, the greatest of the Vedic rishis, was born of a hetaira. Vishwamitra, the son of a king, became a rishi.

Veda Vyaasa himself was the son of a fisher girl. Sri Krishna's father, Vasudeva and Kunti were born of a Naga princess; some of his ancestors inter-married with the Nagas. Bheema married a Rakshasi named Hidimbaa. Arjuna had Naga wives.

With the advance of Aryan culture in the country, all the people who came within the orbit of the *Sanatana dharma*, were provided with a social status.

Vyaasa was a mighty figure accepted on all hands as the embodiment of *dharma*. In the *Bhagavad Gita*, Sri Krishna even identifies Vyaasa with himself. The Yogic school accepted him as the ideal *Vitraga*, though he had a wife and son.

He was considered to be Vishnu with two arms and not four; as Brahma with one face and not four, and as Shiva without the third eye. In fact, several Puranas accept him as one of the avataars of Vishnu.

K. M. MUNSHI

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CHARACTERS IN THIS STORY

KRISHNA DVAIPAAYANA—later called Veda Vyaasa, generally referred to as the Master.

MATSYAGANDHAA (shortly Matsyaa)—his mother; a fisher-girl; later the Empress Satyavati, consort of the Emperor Shantanu.

PARAASHARA—his father; a very learned Arya rishi at the close of Vedic period; son of Shakti; grandson of Vasishtha, the great Vedic sage; founder of a school of Jyotish (Astrology), Dharmashastra and Ayurveda.*

ASVAL AND PAILA—Disciples of Sage Paraashara.

JARUTH—father of Matsyagandhaa; a fisherman living in an islet near Kalpi on the Yamunaa.

CHANDODARI—mother of Matsyagandhaa.

*

SAHASRARJUNA (Arjuna of the Thousand Arms)—the king of Mahishmati, the powerful leader of the Haihaya tribes, who invaded Aryavarta; himself killed and his invading hordes destroyed by Parashu Raama, the Bhargava.

RICHIKA—the High Priest of Mahishmat (grandfather of Sahasrarjuna) and Chief of the Bhrigus, a tribe of warrior priest.**

JAMADAGNI—son of Richika, one of the seven leading Vedic rishis (seers).

PARASHU RAAMA—son of Jamadagni.
(Later in life accepted as God-incarnate).

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* Among the works attributed to Paraashara are: *Brihat-Paraashara*; *Hora Shastra* (Astrology); *Paraashara-Dharmasamhita* (Law Text) and *Paraashara-Samhita* (Ayurveda).

** The earlier episodes are described in my book *Bhagawan Parashurama*, published by the Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan.

PROLOGUE

THE tempestuous and headstrong King Mahishmat spread terror from his capital Mahishmati in Anupdesh on the West Coast. Even the denizens of Patala, who lived across the dark seas, trembled at his very name.

In the arrogance of unlimited power, Mahishmat paid no heed to the advice of the Sage Richika, his High Priest and hereditary leader of the Bhrigus, a tribe of warrior priests.

Under Mahishmat's leadership, the Haihaya tribes also defied the Cosmic Law of *Rita*, which the Great God Varuna, who ruled the Universe, had laid down for the Aryas to observe.

The Sage Richika, master of the Atharvan lore, was wroth with the Haihayas and their king Mahishmat. He, therefore, laid a curse on them and, as a sign of his displeasure, left Anupdesh.

With his tribesmen, his cows and his horses of unmatched mettle, the Sage migrated to Aryavarta (the unpartitioned Punjab) where the cultured Aryas lived.

In Aryavarta, a large number of *ashrams* (hermitages) had sprung up on the banks of the rivers Sarasvati, Gangaa and Yamunaa, where the presiding sages (rishis) lived in saintliness, inspiring all who came to them with moral fervour, teaching the art of the noble life to their disciples and conversing with the Gods in prayers that were God-like.

When he reached Aryavarta, Richika married King Gadhi's daughter, Satyavati by name, and by her, he begot a son named Jamadagni, who, by his saintliness and learning, found a place amongst the seven eminent rishis.

Mahishmat was succeeded by his grandson, Sahasrarjuna or Arjuna of the Thousand Arms. He came to Aryavarta and wanted Jamadagni, his High Priest's son, a rishi in his own right, to return to Anupdesh, and to revoke the curse pronounced on Mahishmat and his people by Richika.

When the Sage Jamadagni refused to return to Anupdesh or to revoke the curse laid on by his father, Arjuna kidnapped Raama, the youngest son of Jamadagni (referred to as Parashu Raama), and took him to Anupdesh.

Sahasrarjuna felt humiliated when he was made to submit to the canons of fit behaviour prescribed by the Arya code and he vowed vengeance on the rishis.

Parashu Raama or Raama of the Battle Axe, though in his teens, proved a formidable youngster. He challenged Arjuna's authority and led into Aryavarta an exodus of Haihayas who were sick of the atrocities committed by their ruler.

Arjuna of the Thousand Arms, with his ruthless tribesmen, advanced like a hurricane to destroy Aryavarta and to uproot the *ashrams* of the rishis.

When Arjuna was approaching Aryavarta, Sage Paraashara, the grandson of Vasishtha, the greatest of Rishis, went from *ashram* to *ashram* and king to king, warning them of the threatened destruction and pleaded with them to combine in resisting Arjuna's hordes. However, his plea fell on deaf ears. The kings of the Arya tribes were complacent; they had confidence in Aryavarta's invulnerability.

On his way to the banks of Sarasvati, where the leading sages had their *ashrams*, Arjuna came with his formidable host to Paraashara's *ashram*, situated on the banks of the Yamunaa.

What Paraashara had foreseen, happened. His *ashram* was set fire to, its inmates massacred, the women raped and cattle butchered or taken away to feed the hordes.

When Paraashara returned to his *ashram*, he found it a huge charnel-house.

Paraashara decided to face the invader and appeal to his humanity. Years ago he had met Arjuna, a young man, fierce in temper and proud of his strength, at his grandfather's *ashram*.

He saw Arjuna coming in a chariot drawn by powerful horses, enveloped in a cloud of dust. About a hundred chariot warriors were following him.

Arjuna's face was fearsome; his eyes were drunk with power.

Paraashara went forward, leaving his fate in the hands of the Gods, caught hold of the reins of Arjuna's horses and faced him.

Arjuna stared in surprise at the man who, single-handed, dared to arrest his chariot's progress. His companions drew their swords; a glittering array of arms surrounded the Sage.

'What are you doing, you fool ?' asked Arjuna. 'Do you know who I am ?'

Sage Paraashara stood firm and unhesitant. 'I know that you are the lord of the Haihayas, a mighty warrior. But I want you to go back. You do not seem to realize what you are doing now. Out of every drop of Arya blood that you shed will arise a vindicator.'

Then, in a beseeching tone, he appealed : 'King of Haihayas, you are the lord of the world. Why do you persist in this destruction ? Hatred has never helped anyone, nor will it help you. It is a dread fire, which invariably consumes its author. Pause, ponder, listen to what I say : Go back to your country.'

Arjuna listened to the Sage's words with contempt. He was sure that the man who had the temerity to talk to him in this way must be mad. With a cruel laugh, he lashed at the sage. One of his followers hit his leg. The sage fell unconscious to the ground. Blood flowed from his mouth. Arjuna's men laughed in exultation.

Without casting even a look at the fallen man, the destroyers rode away. All that night they were busy plundering the villages, destroying *ashrams* and raping women.

On the outskirts of what was once his *ashram*, where he had led his numerous disciples along the path of godliness, Paraashara lay unconscious.

II

A little after sunrise, the boat of a fisherman named Jaruth reached the bank where Paraashara lay unconscious.

Jaruth lived on an islet in the Yamunaa. Whenever he went on a long fishing expedition, he used to pay a visit to the *ashram* and offer salutations to the sage.

When he saw the *ashram* burning, he did not dare to approach it. But the next day the vandals had disappeared.

Mooring the boat, Jaruth and his family stepped out on to the bank, despite the fear in their hearts.

Among them was Jaruth's fourteen-year-old daughter Matsy*aa*. Her loins and breasts were wrapped round with a piece of cloth. She wore ornaments of shell and silver on her neck, hands and feet.

She was very graceful. Her young breasts were like twin flower buds. She was dark in colour and in the sunshine, she looked as if she was made of shining copper. Her lovely cheeks glowed with happiness and joy.

Whilst her father and her uncles were busy lighting a fire to prepare a repast for themselves, Matsy*aa* saw a man lying a short distance away on the sandy shore. She ran towards him.

Paraashara was still unconscious. Blood was trickling from the corners of his mouth.

The girl was scared. She bent down to have a closer look at the man lying there and recognised the rishi.

On every visit, she had accompanied her father Jaruth, and offered salutations to the Sage and presented him with freshly-caught fish. The Sage used to bless them with his hands and a smile. His face was gentle and his eyes beamed with kindliness.

Matsy*aa*'s heart wept at the sight of the kind sage lying in a pool of blood. She called out to him, but there was no reply. Had been killed, she thought. However, in order to find out whether he was dead or alive, she placed her ear on his chest.

Then she began to cry loudly. Hearing her cry, her mother, Chandodari, who was preparing the repast, shouted back : 'What is the matter ?'

'Mother, the venerable rishi is dead,' sobbed Matsy*aa*.

The mother came running, raised her daughter and placed her hand on the rishi's eyes. He opened them for a moment and closed them again. 'He is alive ! He is alive, for sure !' shouted Chandodari.

Hearing her shouts, the fishermen, frightened to death, gathered around the Sage.

'Go back to the boat,' said Jaruth to Matsy*aa* and Chandodari. 'Those barbarous men have burnt down the *ashram*. This place is only fit for demons now. Come, let us go.'

Matsy*aa* said to Jaruth : 'Father, our rishi is dying.'

Jaruth recognised Paraashara. 'Oh, it is our rishi !' He went up to Paraashara and looked at him. 'The demon who burnt the *ashram* must have killed him,' he said.

Chandodari said : 'No, he is alive. Let us take him with us. We can nurse him back to life.'

They lifted Paraashara into the boat. The mother and daughter gave him water to drink and washed his body with water, removing the blood stains. The boat hurried back to the islet near Kalpi.

When they returned to the islet, they placed the sage on a bed of soft green leaves.

For two days they nursed the sage as best they could.

On the third day, when the moon was shining brightly and the waters of the river were flowing in soothing music, Paraashara recovered his consciousness. He was still in a daze.

For a while, Matsy*aa* kept staring at the rishi's pale face, watching it. Then she went up to him. Taking the rishi's head in her lap, she crooned a fisher-girl's song in a soft low voice.

Physically wounded and mentally sick because of the hatred of man for man, Paraashara found comfort in the song which the young girl was singing.

CHAPTER 1

'COME, FATHER, COME'

IT WAS evening and the fast-flowing waters of the river Yamuna looked like a torrent of molten gold.

On the edge of a small islet, separated from the mainland by a narrow creek, a six-year-old boy was standing, steadfastly gazing at the western horizon where the waters of the river appeared to touch the sky, waving his hands as if in invitation.*

The boy was dark in colour and of a squat build. His forehead was broad, his eyes dark and luminous, his features homely.

The boy lived on the island with his mother, her father Jaruth and her uncles, together with other members of their families. They formed part of the fishing community in the village beyond the creek. Their main occupation was to ferry travellers across the river in small boats and to catch fish and bring it to the market in Kalpi, a settlement on the bank of the river on the other side of the creek. To this fishing community, the river Yamuna was a mother, a living goddess, who provided them with food and an occupation which gained them a livelihood.

The boy spent his days catching and cleaning fish and helping his grandfather to stitch nets. He was an obedient child, who never shirked work. Whenever his mother or one of his grandparents went to the settlement to sell fish, he accompanied them with a small basket of fish which he had caught himself. He never mixed with the boys of his own age in the village and was never interested in their games. Whenever he was in their company, he would retreat into silence.

He lived in a world of his own and the other boys of his age in the village thought that he was a little mad.

Whenever he was free, he came to stand on the edge of the islet, facing west, as if waiting for his father; sometimes he hailed him as if his voice could reach his father wherever he might be. That was what he was doing now.

Soon the small boat, plied by his mother, which had gone to the other bank to ferry passengers, returned to the islet. He took no notice of her; he continued to wave his hand and call : 'Father, come soon. When are you coming?'

His mother, Matsyagandhaa, jumped out of the boat, tied it to a wooden pillar, and with impatient steps, went to the hut in which she lived with her parents and son.

---

*I had the privilege of visiting the spot, traditionally believed to have been the birth place of Veda Vyaasa, and of laying the foundation for a monument. I don't know whether the monument has been constructed.

Matsy*aa* was about twenty, slender and shapely in every limb, glowing with radiant health from living in the open the whole day, braving the sun and the cold, the storm and the flood. Her gait was graceful and her eyes fascinating. She had a piece of cloth tied around her loins, held in position by a girdle, and a heavy necklace covering the upper part of her body, made of silver and shells.

She ran with sprightly steps towards the hut, calling out to her son : 'Krishna, Krishna'. Chandodari, her mother, who was cooking food, shouted back : 'That mad boy of yours is doing the usual thing : calling to his father.' Then she added by way of commentary : 'Who will never come.'

Matsyagandhaa ran to the boy, picked him up in her arms, gave him a loving hug, and nestling her head on his shoulders, asked him : 'Krishna, why do you waste your time ? Your father, wherever he is, cannot hear you.'

The boy looked innocently at his mother as if it was the first time that he had heard this though she had been telling it him every day.

'You are wrong', said the boy with an assurance much beyond his years. 'He will come, Mother. He comes to me always when I am asleep—and tells me that he will come if I call him'.

'Oh, Krishna !' said Matsyagandhaa with a gesture of despair. 'You are such a good and wise boy. Why do you behave like this ?'

This tragic faith of her son's in an impossible hope, made her miserable. Every day, the mother and the son talked of the same thing, in almost the same words.

'I want to go to Father', he said with a passionate earnestness unnatural in a boy of his age and took hold of her hands, looking at her face in mute appeal.

Matsyagandhaa patted the boy whom she loved. 'Haven't I told you many times ? How can I take you to your father ? I don't know where he is living.'

The boy, in his innocent way, was ready with the answer : 'If he does not come, we will go in search of him in our boat. Mother Yamuna is always kind; she will show us the way,' he added.

With tears in her eyes, Matsy*aa* said : 'Haven't I told you every day that he will not and...', her voice broke, 'cannot take us with him?'

'But why ?' asked Krishna, opening his innocent eyes in surprise. 'I am sure, he will.'

'I cannot tell you why,' she said, suppressing a sob. 'Some day, when you are a grown man, I will tell you why.'

'Why not tell me now? Every boy in the village lives with his father,' he said pathetically, pointing to the fishermen's village across the creek.

Matsyagandhaa appreciated the intense passion with which Krishna awaited his father. She had seen that he felt most miserable at having no father to depend upon when every boy of his age had a father living with him.

'Krishna, haven't I told you again and again that you can never go to your father's?' she said in irritation and her voice broke down. She did not know what to do. How could she explain to the sensitive boy, who was living on an impossible dream, that he could not live with his father?

The boy fixed his wide eyes on his mother's sad face. 'I am sure, Mother, he will be glad if we go to him.'

Matsyagandhaa wiped the tears that again welled up in her eyes and said: 'How can I explain it to you? He cannot take you with him—either you or me. He is a very, very great man. People worship him. But he lives far, far away, and we are humble folks'.

The boy affectionately clung to his mother. "Don't cry, Mother. As soon as he comes, I will beg of him to take both of us with him, and I am sure, he will never say "no".'

Matsy*aa* hugged him again and turned her head away so that he might not see the tears that were coursing down her cheeks. Then, in a choking voice, she said: 'You should not think of your father. Some day, he will not be able to come here.'

The boy's face was an open book; it reflected that he did not share her views about his father.

'The last time he came,' said the boy, 'Grandfather told me that he would return when the full-moon comes to Aashaadha.* That was the day I was born, wasn't it? Grandfather is sure that he will take me with him one day.'

'I wish Grandfather's hopes could be fulfilled', said Matsy*aa* and broke down.

The boy clung to his mother. 'Grandfather is not like you, Mother. Every time I talk to you about Father, you shed tears. But Grandfather says that Father knows everything—about the stars, the moon, the fish, the trees, the alligators, and also far-away places and kings who ride on elephants. He also told me that Father would visit us when the full-moon comes to Aashaadha. Don't cry, Mother,' the boy said, reaching out to wipe her tears.

'I will not cry, I promise you, Krishna. Let us wait till he comes,' said Matsy*aa* with a sigh. 'Only three more days to wait.'

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*Aashaadha— a constellation which gives its name to the month Aashaadha in the Hindu calendar. Traditionally the full-moon day of the month of Aashaadha is the birthday of Veda Vyaasa.

'I know,' reassured the boy. 'Grandfather told me that if I call him with all my heart, he is sure to come. Mother, do you think that Grandfather has been telling me lies?'

'No, no,' she replied. 'Your father knows everything,' she admitted, to put an end to this painful conversation.

As she was leaving him, Krishna said to his mother with the air of a full-grown man: 'Well, Mother, why do we have to wait for him here? Let us go to him.' He had a suspicion that his mother knew where his father was.

'But where to?' she asked.

'Where else but to father.'

Matsy*aa* smothered a sob. She did not know where he lived ; he led a perilous life. She was not sure whether he would come at all. She had realised long ago that a time would come when he would stop coming to Kalpi. Then the boy's heart would break.

The whole situation was tragic beyond words. Her father was trying his best to get her married to a suitable young man in their community. He had also held repeated consultations with other elders of the fisher community about securing one. However, he had found it difficult to get a good husband for her, prepared to adopt her illegitimate son, Krishna, who, though very affectionate, was inflexible in his devotion to a father he met only three or four days a year; he would never reconcile himself to a make-shift father.

She knew that her father realised the whole predicament and purposely encouraged the boy, when his father came, to insist that he should be taken away. That was also why he always talked to the boy about his father's greatness.

She appreciated that it was for her sake her father wanted to get rid of the boy. Her father, mother and uncles were getting old. When they died, she would be left homeless, and so long as the boy was with her, no suitable young man would agree to marry her.

She also realized how impossible it was for Krishna's father to take the boy away with him. Though he had once been one of the most respected sages of the Aryas, his enemies—she had no idea why they persecuted him—were implacable; they would kill him if he was found, and that forced him to move from place to place. His life would be in greater danger if he took around in his wake an illegitimate son born of a fisher-girl. It was a secret which she alone knew. At the same time, she knew that it would be a tragedy for the boy if his father stopped coming.

Once Krishna started speaking about his father, there was no stopping him. He had a very charming way of talking; he was wise beyond his years; whenever he accompanied one of the members of his family in the ferry boat, the passengers were attracted to him. They loved the way he talked of how great his father was, of how he could talk to the gods and of how, when he himself was older, his father would take him away with him. His father knew everything, he said to the passengers—about the stars and the sky, the each drop of water in the Yamuna; about the fish and the alligators in the river. That was why he was going with his father, who would teach him everything. The passengers knew that he was the fruit of a momentary lapse on the part of his mother; the stranger whoever he was, they were sure, would never take the boy away with him.

However, the boy talked so sweetly and with such earnestness that the passengers listened to his hopes with interest even with affectionate solicitude. But when they parted from him, they shook their heads sadly. Such a bright and winsome boy, but so wildly unaware!

When the full-moon moved near the constellation of Aashaadha, Krishna became very impatient, bubbling with joy at the thought of meeting his father. His mother and her parents shuddered at the prospect, almost the certainty, that his father would not come. And then what would happen to the boy?

However, Krishna was busy with thoughts of his father; he caught the finest fish in the river, cleaned it and asked his grandmother to cook it properly, because his father was coming. His father must be given the fish which he himself had fished and cleaned, and no other, for was he not his son?—an argument which, according to him, was unanswerable.

He told his grandmother again and again that his father had come to him in his dreams and promised to take him away; that he would also take his mother with him. The grandmother only shook her head.

With tears in her eyes, Matsy*aa* prepared him for the tragic end. 'Krishna, suppose he does not come?'

'Then, as I told you, Mother, we will go to him in our boat.'

'But I have said to you again and again, Krishna, that we don't know where he lives,' she said impatiently. That had no effect on the boy.

'I have been talking to Mother Yamuna. She is so very kind and will show us the way. Mother, get ready and don't cry. If you cry before Father, he will think that I am making you unhappy.' He clung to his mother, who bent down and caressed him.

Her heart was heavy with the fear of the shock that the boy would receive when his father did not come.

CHAPTER 2

THE PARTING

ON THE day when the full-moon came to the star Aashaadha, Krishna rose from his bed very early and had a hasty dip in the river. After his bathe, he ran to the edge of the islet, and facing the west, called upon his father to come, as if in a trance: 'Father, come. Come soon.'

As though in response to his request, he saw a tiny spot on the waters in the distance moving towards Kalpi. He jumped for joy. 'Mother, come here. Father is coming,' he shouted, waving his hands vigorously.

Matsy*aa* came out of the hut. She knew that that night the full-moon would come to Aashaadha. It was the day when her son Krishna had been born; also the day his father had come to meet his son in previous years; the day to which Krishna always looked forward with growing impatience.

She had shuddered at the pospect of his father not coming on his annual visit. A wicked king had destroyed his *ashram*. Now he lived far, far away—she did not know where. He was a great sage, a Muni; she was a poor fisher-girl, his partner only in some passing moments of ecstasy, a negligible factor in his life.

She had been waiting for this day with trepidation. If his father failed to come as expected, Krishna would never recover from the blow, and he was so charming, obedient and wise. Mother Yamuna had given her a wonderful son, but as things were, she could not keep him with her.

Krishna's concentrated gaze was fixed on the tiny spot moving upon the waters—it was taking the shape of a large boat—as if lending it speed by his intense gaze. As the boat came nearer, Krishna recognised his father and began to jump for joy.

Though a year had passed since he saw him last, the impression on his memory of his father's personality was very vivid. His father's complexion very fair, so different from his own; his long greyish beard and matted locks; his powerful body: the deer-skin which he wore; the staff and the water gourd, which he always carried with him; the garland of large *rudraksha* beads round his neck; and above all, the sacred thread suspended from his left shoulder—were all familiar to him in his memories and in his dreams.

Krishna shouted with all the strength of his lungs: 'Father, I am coming.' He shook off the hand which Matsyagandhaa had placed on his shoulder, plunged into the river and began to swim towards the boat.

Muni Paraashara, in spite of being lame, jumped out of the boat, lifted Krishna from the water and hugged him as if he was a baby. Krishna encircled his neck with both his arms, laughed and cried at the same time, and nestled his head against the Muni's beard.

When the Muni stepped out of the water, Matsy*aa*, her parents and other members of her family, who had come out of their huts, prostrated themselves before the Muni and touched his feet in reverence.

Krishna, slipping down from his Father's arms, turned to his mother and said proudly: 'Didn't I tell you that father would come for sure?'

There was a humorous twinkle in the Muni's eyes. 'Matsy*aa*, my son knows me better than you do. You were afraid that I would not come,' he said and laughed mischievously. Then he turned to the boatmen who had brought him to the islet and said: 'Now, you may take the other passengers to wherever they want to go. Pick me up on your return journey three days from now. Don't forget.'

The other passengers who had also jumped out of the boat, offered their salutations to the sage, for he was well known to many of the people residing in the hamlets on the banks of the Yamuna, by the fond name of Pangu (lame) Muni. They even called him Pangu Muni to his face, to which he responded by the humorous twinkle of his eyes. With his right arm extended, the Muni blessed them: 'May the Gods make your journey happy.'

Krishna's heart was filled with pride. His father was a great man.

It was with some difficulty that Krishna allowed himself to be placed on the ground, but he would not part from his father; he held on to one of his father's fingers lest by some magic he might disappear.

Krishna knew both his father's disciples; they also had come last year. One, Asval, was middle-aged; the other, Paila, was in his teens. He offered salutations to them and received their blessings.

Paraashara then received salutations from the fisher-folks who had crossed the creek in order to welcome him. After they had gone, the Muni and his disciples went for their bathe. Krishna accompanied them.

After his bathe, standing in the waters, Paraashara offered the usual ritualistic worship to the Sun God. Krishna also had a second dip in the river and copied his every gesture and tried to capture the accent and cadence with which his father chanted the *mantras*.

'It is wrong of you, Krishna, to recite the divine *mantras* which I utter,' said the Muni.

The boy looked disappointed, almost hurt. 'Why?' he asked. 'Am I not your son?' He was not going to allow his father to forget his status.

'Of course, you are my son. But these are not ordinary chants: they are the WORD, divine in themselves. You cannot recite it till you are reborn,' said the Muni and patted Krishna on the back.

Krishna was puzzled; his brow was puckered. How could he be re-born? 'Were you also re-born?' he asked.

'Yes, of course, replied the Muni.

'When will I be re-born?'

'When you are able to chant the *mantras* with the proper tone and keep the vows associated with them.'

'But I can chant them now,' said the boy and chanted the sacred *mantras* exactly as his father had done.

Paraashara smiled. He felt a touch of pride at having a son, who, in spite of the surroundings in which he had been brought up, could chant the WORD in the same tone as he had done. 'Store it in your memory, don't utter it, or the Gods will be angry.'

Paraashara sat to offer worship to the Fire God. Krishna also sat down with him and closely followed the *mantras* which his father chanted, invoking the deity. Now that he could not chant the *mantras* himself, he followed his father's advice and stored the words, cadence and accent in his memory.

After the worship was over, Paraashara went up to the little crowd of fisher-folk who, having learned of his arrival, had crossed the creek to seek his blessing.

Then the Muni and the male members of the family sat down for their meal—modest fare consisting mainly of fish served on banana leaves. Krishna quietly sat near his father, ready to share the food from the same leaf.

His grandfather called him: 'Krishna, come here and take your food with me, as you always do.'

'No' said Krishna emphatically. 'Now, Father is here, I will eat with him.' Then, with charming innocence, he turned to his father. 'Father, will you be angry if I share your meal with you?' He was afraid lest his father, in displeasure, might not take him away with him.

'No, my son. I am glad that you share your food with me,' replied the Muni and patted his back.

Before eating his meal, Paraashara sprinkled water around the banana leaf and chanted some *mantras*. Krishna also, in imitation, sprinkled a little water around the leaf and stored the chants in his memory by moving his lips silently. Everyone looked at him and laughed.

That night Krishna slept with his father. Throughout the night, he continued to keep a hand on his father. His one fear was that his father might leave the islet without him.

Next morning when the family met, after Muni Paraashara had finished his ritual and worship, Matsy*aa*'s father, Jaruth respectfully broached the subject. 'Venerable Sir, Krishna is a problem,' he said.

Paraashara laughed heartily. 'I can see it. He has been a problem even before his birth. Krishna, your grandfather says you are giving trouble to him.'

'Not at all,' said Krishna with a blank smile. 'He is only teasing me, Father, I obey him implicitly.' He added, laughing mischievously: 'Look at him; he is smiling.' Everyone laughed heartily.

'Venerable Sir,' said Jaruth seriously. 'All the time he talks of going with you.' The old fisherman continued apologetically folding his hands: 'We have no claims on you, Venerable Sir. We realise your difficulty in taking him with you. But if you leave him here, it will break his heart.' Jaruth was determined to get rid of Krishna; that was the only way he could see Matsy*aa* married to some suitable young fisherman.

'Don't worry, Jaruth,' said Paraashara with a smile. If you and Matsy*aa* have no objection, I will take him away with me. Only I would have liked him to be with his mother till he was able to look after himself.'

Krishna interrupted: 'No Father. I am grown up now.' He squared his shoulders and put his chest out. 'Do you know, yesterday the fish slipped out of grandfather's grasp and I caught them.'

Every one laughed. Paraashara said affectionately: 'Then I will take you with me. But you will have to be a very good boy.'

Krishna's face beamed with joy. Then he asked plaintively: 'Father, why not take Mother with us also? She will look after you.' Then he had a puzzled look on his face as he asked: 'Father, you said that I would be re-born. But how can I be re-born without Mother?'

The Muni laughed aloud. 'We will manage it somehow, my son: 'Dont't worry. But if she comes with us, who will look after your grandfather and grandmother? They have grown very old.'

'That is true,' said Krishna slowly, as if pondering over the problem. Then he continued: 'But when they are not alive, who will look after Mother?'

Everybody felt nervous. Jaruth and his wife found their hearts were trembling: What would the Muni decide about Matsy*aa*?

For a few moments the Muni closed his eyes in meditaition; then he opened them and smiled. 'Dont't worry about your mother.' He closed his eyes again. Everyone present looked at the Muni with awe. Then he opened his eyes and said: 'She has a great future before her. She is going to be very happy; the stars show it. Also when you grow up, Dvaipa, you will look after her, wherever she is.'

Matsy*aa* prostrated herself before the Muni and he placed his hand on her head in blessing.

For two days Krishna went on telling whomsoever cared to listen to him that he was going with his father. He swam across the creek to announce his good fortune to the fisher boys and girls of his own age in the village. Sometimes they had made fun of him for having no father; now he had his chance to talk about his father with irrepressible enthusiasm.

His father knew everything, Krishna said, and he had promised to teach him all that he knew. He would then know about the stars, the moon, the fish; even how many drops of water there are in the river. He would also have disciples of his own, as his father had; then he would grow a beard and have matted locks. He would also go with him to the kings who rode on elephants and they would prostrate themselves before his father and him and ask for their blessing.

Again and again, Krishna would ask his father to confirm that he would teach him everything, and the Muni would wonder at the tremendous spirit of inquiry shown by his little son.

The boat in which the Muni was to return, arrived at the islet. The fishermen gathered to bid good-bye to the Muni and seek his blessing.

When the moment of parting came, Matsy*aa*'s eyes were full of tears. Perhaps she would never see her son again. But with her strong commonsense, she realised that under the circumstances it was best for her son that he should go with his father.

Her son was so gifted that it would be a sin to bring him up as a fisherman, ferrying boats from one bank of the river to the other. The fishermen's world in which he was being brought up was too small for her wonderful boy, for he had always wanted to count the stars and the drops of water in the river. She was thankful to

Mother Yamuna for giving her a son who could grow up like his father.

She fully realised that her fate also depended upon Krishna going with his father. There would be some possibility then of a young and able fisherman accepting her in marriage.

When the time for departure came, the people gathered together were surprised to find that Krishna was not there. Some went to look for him in their huts. Then, to their surprise, they found that he had waded through the water, clambered up into the boat and was quietly standing, waiting for his father, lest his mother and grandfather should change their minds at the last minute and keep him with them.

Paraashara laughed aloud. 'Krishna wants to go away, leaving me here with you, Matsy*aa*.' Then, raising his voice, he said: 'Krishna, come here. You must fall at the feet of your mother and grandparents and ask their permission to leave, and they will bless you. That is the way of the Aryas.'

Reluctantly, Krishna jumped from the boat and as he began to wade through the shallow waters, everyone burst into uproarious laughter.

Krishna had enveloped himself in a spare deer-skin lying in the boat, which, because of his size, covered his whole body from neck to feet.

He came out of the water, holding the deer-skin in its place with both his hands. As he tried to prostrate himself before his grandfather, he lost control of the deer-skin and both he and the skin collapsed and tumbled to the ground to the merriment of everyone there.

Paraashara lifted his son, readjusted the deer-skin and tied it with a piece of rope so that it might not slip off his body, and caressed him.

The moment of parting had come. Tears coursed down Matsy*aa*'s cheeks. 'Krishna, when will you meet me again?' she asked piteously.

The boy looked at his father, suspecting a trap to keep him from going with his father, but was re-assured by his smile. 'Mother, don't worry. Whenever you want me, Mother, I will be by your side.'

Matsy*aa* hugged him.

'Krishna, an Arya never forgets his mother', said the Muni. 'She is your Mother Goddess.'

Matsy*aa* looked at the Muni with gratitude. She covered her face with her hands, and not being able to restrain her distress, turned it towards the wall of the hut.

The Muni said : 'Matsy*aa*, don't cry. Bless the child. I will always call Krishna "Dviapaayana"—the child of this islet—so that he may never forget you.'*

The Muni lifted the boy in his arms and waded out to the boat.

'Mother, don't cry,' shouted Krishna joyfully. 'I am going with Father.'

**Dweepa* in Sanskrit means an island. Its derivative Dvaipaayana means one born in an island.

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CHAPTER 3

THE FIELD OF ASHES

FATHER and son began their journey upstream in high spirits. Dvaipaayana had never travelled up the river and everything was, therefore, new and delightful to him. He was excited to see the alligators lying on the banks like logs of wood, or slipping noiselessly into the water, and the herds of elephants coming to the opposite bank to drink water; he was transported with delight when he saw baby elephants frolicking and spraying water from their trunks on to their elders.

Dvaipa knew only the fisherman's slang. The Muni also knew it well, but at the earliest opportunity, he began to introduce his son to the divine language of the Aryas. He was gratified to see that his little son picked up the language quickly and began to make efforts to speak it, though haltingly.

When the sun was about to set, the boat was halted near the village of Godhuli. The passengers who had reached their destination left the boat; others made preparations to spend the night on the bank of the river.

No sooner did the villagers hear that Pangu (lame) Muni—as they called him—had arrived, than they came to the bank of the river with drums and fifes playing, to offer their salutations and seek his blessing. They loved the lame Muni; the Muni returned their love with parental affection. Soon the ailing and the sick began to arrive to seek the Muni's blessing; he was the master of the art of healing.

Gautama, the Acharya of a small hermitage on the outskirts of the village of Godhuli—an erstwhile disciple of the Muni's—also hurried to the bank with his disciples, and fell at the feet of his *guru* in deep reverence.

When the Muni introduced his son Dvaipa, the Acharya not only blesssd him, but hugged him with affection.

Acharya Gautama invited the Muni and Dvaipa, together with the two disciples, Asval and Paila, and the passengers who were halting there for the night, to his hermitage.

When they arrived at the hermitage and after the evening rituals were performed and everyone had had his food, guests and host retired to sleep.

Dvaipa lay beside his father on a deer-skin. It was a clear night and as the starry heavens moved majestically above, the Muni pointed out the principal stars by name and also identified the planets which had an influence on the life of man. Dvaipa, on the authority of his mother's father, had always claimed that his father knew all about the stars; now he was certain that he did.

The Muni pointed out the seven Primeval Sages.[1] 'That one,' said the Muni, pointing to one star, 'is our ancestor, Vasishtha.'

'And will you also become a star, Father ?' asked Dvaipa.

'I can, if I uphold the WORD,'[2] replied the Muni.

'And if I uphold the WORD shall I too become a star ?' asked Dvaipa.

'Of course, you can,' assured the Muni.

Dvaipa's heart was full of joy. 'But Father, who moves the stars ?', he asked. 'They seem to be travelling westwards.'

'It is the Lord Varuna, the Great God of the skies and the waters, who moves the sky. The stars are his eyes, which look into the deeds of everyone.'

'Even yours and mine ?' asked Dvaipa.

'Certainly,' replied the Muni.

Dvaipa was considerably impressed. Now he was under the care of the God Varuna.

Next day, early in the morning, after the morning rituals, the Muni, with the other inmates of the *ashram*, offered worship to the Fire God, invoking him with appropriate chants. Dvaipa sat near his father and treasured up in his memory whatever his father chanted.

When the sun rose, the Muni, with his son and disciples, was given a hearty send-off before they boarded the boat.

No sooner had they started on their journey than Dvaipa began to ask questions. The Muni wondered at the irrepressible zest with which his son wanted to know everything and encouraged him to ask questions, however absurd, replying to them with a smile, so that the boy's self-respect might be built up.

Dvaipa had only one problem : How to induce his father to invest him with the sacred thread, so that he could enter the fold of the Twiceborn (*Dvija*).

With some effort, Dvaipa summoned up courage and said : 'Father, you said that if you invest me with the sacred thread, I will have to keep all the vows. Tell me what they are. I am sure I will keep them.'

'It is not so easy to keep the vows at your age,' said the Muni. 'You will have to lead the rigid life of a Brahmachari, live with your *guru*, walking in the strict path prescribed by the sages, take only the food which you have secured by begging, and above all, surrender your life to the WORD.'

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[1] *Ursa Major*.

[2] See the Note appended to this Chapter.

'I will do so, Father,' said Dvaipa in an appealing voice. 'Paila does it; why not I ? He is older than me by only eight years."

The Muni patted his son on the back and continued : 'The *mantras* are not mere chants, son; they are divinities themselves. When you live for them, the secret of the *Rita* (Cosmic Order) of the God Varuna will be unfolded to you'.

They broke their journey near a hamlet and performed the noon-day rituals. The residents of the hamlet welcomed them with reverence and gave them food.

After midday, they started on their journey. Dvaipa found that his father was cheerful and reverted to the problem oppressing him. 'Father, when did you start chanting the WORD ?'

The Muni smiled; his son was not going to accept defeat. 'It is a secret, my son', he said.

Promptly there came another question, made in all seriousness. 'Why do you want to kept it a secret from me ? Am I not your son ?'

'If I tell you, you may not believe it,' said the Muni.

Dvaipa felt hurt at his father's lack of confidence in him. He was also afraid that if he pressed his father to tell him the secret, he might get angry and take him back to his mother.

The Muni saw how his son felt hurt and decided not to allow anything to come between them. 'I will tell you the secret if you keep it to yourself', he said.

'I will, Father. Rely upon me.'

'My grandfather, Vasishtha, was the patriarch of all the sages in Aryavarta. He conversed with the Gods and they chanted him the WORD, with its words, cadence and accent in all their purity.'

Dvaipa opened his eyes wide. 'Could grandfather really talk to the Gods ?' he asked.

'Yes', replied the Muni.

'Can you talk to the Gods yourself, Father ?'

'Once I could. Not now,' replied the Muni sorrowfully and added with a smile : 'You are never tired of asking questions.'

'I want to know everything that you know, Father,' said Dvaipa with his good-natured smile.

The Muni appreciated his son's earnestness. The boy paused for a while and then reverted to his favourite subject : 'What was your age when you were taught the WORD ?'

'I learnt it when I heard grandfather chanting it.'

'Did not your father teach you anything ?'

'My father could not; he was killed in battle. I was in my mother's womb at the time,' replied the Muni.

Dvaipa pondered over the problem, and with charming innocence, asked : 'Will you get angry with me if I ask you some more questions ?'

The Muni laughed aloud. 'I have taken a vow not to get angry. And angry with you ? Never ! I only hesitate to answer your questions, for I fear that you, at your age, may not understand the significance of what I say. What do you want to know ?'

'How could your grandfather teach you to chant the WORD before you were born ?'

'He did that; the Gods had given him powers which no other man ever possessed,' said the Muni with a sigh. His eyes had a far-away look. Then he spoke in a low voice : 'Those were great days.'

'Had your grandfather an *ashram* ?' asked Dvaipa.

'He was the most revered of the Arya rishis, as I told you. He had the largest *ashram* in Aryavarta with over two hundred senior disciples,' said the Muni.

'Why did he have to go to the war ?' asked Dvaipa.

'He was the *guru* of King Sudas, against whom the Ten Kings were arrayed. It was a very long war, but with the blessing of grandfather, King Sudas won it. Have you any more questions to ask ?'

'What was your father called and your mother ?'

'My father went by the name of Shakti and my mother, Adrishyanti.'

'Are we going to your grandfather's *ashram* ?'

'It is a painful subject, my boy. Let us not revive the memories of those unfortunate days,' said the Muni sadly.

'Please tell me one thing,' said Dvaipa. 'When did he die ?'

'He died many years ago. When the wicked King Sahasrarjuna burnt down the *ashrams* in Dharmakshetra, grandfather surrendered his life to go to the Land of the Forefathers of his own free will before the demon could kill him.'[1]

'Are we going to Dharmakshetra ?' asked Dvaipa.

'No', said the Muni. 'It is now a wilderness. I cannot bear to see desolation where once the learned rishis chanted the WORD.'

'Have you an *ashram* of your own ?' asked Dvaipa.

'When are we going to your *ashram* ?'

'Not now,' said the Muni; a shadow of anguish fell over his usually cheerful face. Dvaipa saw it and remained silent.

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[1] This episode is described in detail in my romance *Bhagwan Parashurama*, summarised in English and published by Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan.

The next day, they started early on their journey. A little after sunrise, as they negotiated a bend of the river, Dvaipa saw at a distance a huge field with mounds of ashes, charred stumps of trees and huge ant-hills; not a man or animal could be seen; it was frightful—a vast funeral ground.

'What is that, Father ?' asked Dvaipa, his voice trembling.

'It is called the Field of Ashes. Don't look at it. Close your eyes for a while,' replied the Muni.

The boatman halted the boat near a hamlet. Its residents, who were taking their bath or watering their cattle in the river, recognised Pangu Muni, offered salutations and soon brought food for him and his companions.

Several passengers, who had reached their destination, left for the hamlet.

Father and son, with the disciples, Asval and Paila, sat under the shade of a tree and partook of the food which the villagers had brought for them.

The boatman approached them. 'Venerable Muni, are you coming with us to the other bank or staying here ?'

'We will go across,' replied the Muni.

'Why does the boatman want to take us across the river ?' asked Dvaipa after the boatman had left. 'Why not go along this bank ? I want to see the Field of Ashes.'

'This Field of Ashes is under a curse and to sail along it is inauspicious,' said the Muni.

Dvaipa's curiosity was aroused. 'Why do we not stay here, Father and go on foot and see that dreadful place ?' he asked.

The Muni closed his eyes for a little while, and opened them again as if making up his mind. 'You would be unhappy to know all about this unfortunate Field.'

Dvaipa saw the anguish on his father's face. 'I will be very unhappy if you don't tell me all about the Field,' he said in an appealing voice. Then as an afterthought, he added: 'If, however, Father, you feel unhappy talking about it, please don't.'

'Well, I had better tell you all about it. Some day or other, you are sure to hear it. This is my *ashram*, or rather the *ashram* that was mine'. The Muni's voice sank into a whisper.

'Your *ashram*! But it is full of ashes,' said Dvaipa, his eyes wide in surprise.

With a far-away look, the Muni, putting a hand on Dvaipa's shoulder said: 'Once I lived there with my disciples dedicated to the WORD. The *ashram* had about a hundred disciples and a large number of inmates.' Then he paused for a while, collecting his strength to control the agony he was passing through. Dvaipa felt an understanding, rare for a boy of his age, of his father's distress and placed a sympathetic hand on his back.

The Muni continued : 'Then the wicked king came here and killed most of the inmates of my *ashram*. His men committed atrocities on the women. They killed some of our cows and took away the rest.'

'Were you not here, Father, when the wicked king came ?' asked Dvaipa.

'No. I was going the round of the kings of Aryavarta, warning them that if the wicked king was not opposed by all jointly, he would not only destroy every one of them, but all the *ashrams* in Aryavarta; the WORD would be forgotten, and the Gods would turn away from us, and the Arya's way of life would disappear. When I returned here, I found that he had already destroyed my *ashram* and killed most of its inmates.'

Dvaipa was shocked as the picture of the gruesome deed rose before his mind.

The Muni continued: 'I decided to face the wicked king single-handed. I thought that in view of my *tapascharya*[1], the Gods would give me the strength to overcome his brutality'. The Muni stopped for a while as his eyes were clouded by sorow. 'I stopped his chariot and told him not to harbour hatred for men and destroy the house of learning and *tapas*. He hit me with the flat of his sword. One of his men broke my leg. Then, with laughter like a demon's, he left me there unconscious,'

'Was no one with you ?' asked Dvaipa.

'No one', replied the Muni. But the Gods sent your mother and her parents. They had come here as usual to visit the *ashram* and, finding me lying unconscious, took me to Kalpi islet and nursed me back to health.

Have you no other *ashram* ?' asked Dvaipa softly. He was affected by his Father's sorrowful voice.

After I got back my strength, I came to the Field of Ashes. 'Asval and Paila,' said the Muni, pointing to the two disciples with him, 'who had hidden themselves for days in the hollows of trees, joined me.'

'No one was spared except Asval and Paila ?' asked Dvaipa, his voice trembling.

'Some of my other disciples, who escaped into the forest, founded small *ashrams* on the banks of Yamuna, like Gautama's which we saw at Godhuli. I began going up and down the river, heartening them, instructing and inspiring them, teaching the villagers to live in righteousness, healing the sick, and above all, preserving the WORD.'

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[1] *Tapascharya*— pursuit of *tapas*—strict self-discipline of the body and the mind.

Dvaipa was puzzled. 'Why did you not build another *ashram*, a very big one, Father ?' He stretched out both his arms to indicate the bigness of the *ashram* he wanted to build. 'Then I could have been a Muni like you, with many, many disciples.'

'For a long time, the grim war was fought by the Aryas led by the mighty Bhargava, Parashu Raama, the son of the venerable Jamadagni who had also been killed by the wicked king. For, my disciples safety lay in obscurity. If I had put up another *ashram*, the demons roaming about would have destroyed it too, as they destroyed the *ashrams* in Dharmakshetra. They were deadly enemies of the WORD and the *Srotriyas*'.[1]

'What happened to the wicked king ?' asked Dvaipa.

'He was killed by Parashu Raama. But his men went about burning *ashrams*, destroying villages and killing the cows. The whole of Aryavarta was devastated.'

'Are they still destroying the villages, Father ?'

'No, most of them are wiped out. A few still go about doing it. However, what I thought was a calamity has become a blessing in disguise. Instead of one big *ashram*, my senior disciples have *ashrams* all along the banks of the Yamuna. They have created centres of righteous living, preserving the purity of the WORD. And I go up and down the river, visiting these small *ashrams* and teaching them how to live by the Arya code of life and preserve the purity of the WORD. But alas, the WORD, as taught by my disciples is now fragmentary. Except myself, no one knows its three parts in their entirety; but the Atharvana lore, its fourth part, even I have not mastered, except in fragments. My grandfather looked upon the Atharvana lore with disfavour.'

Dvaipa thought for a while, then looked up with a new brightness in his eyes. 'Father, we must re-build the Dharmakshetra—we two,' he said.

The Muni shook his head dolefully. 'That is an impossible task. We do not know how the new king of Hastinapur, Shantanu, will prove—whether he will help in re-building the Dharmakshetra and protect and support the new *ashrams*. I do not know whether all the *rishis* (seers) are alive or the WORD in its entirety has been preserved.'

'Father, we could re-build Dharmakshetra and restore the authority of the WORD', said Dvaipa with enthusiasm.

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[1] *Srotriyas*—those who dedicate themselves to the WORD (*Shruti*).

The Muni, amazed to see the eager expectancy in his son's eyes, heard the mandate of the Gods in the voice of his son—child though he was—and humbly thanked the Gods for giving him a son like Dvaipa. He came to a sudden decision : 'Dvaipa, we will not go across the river, but back to Acharya Gautama at Godhuli and I will invest you with the sacred thread.'

Dvaipa, overwhelmed by his Father's love, clung to him.

NOTE ON THE 'WORD'

As the story turns on the Arya way of life during the lifetime of Veda Vyaasa, a central figure in *Mahabharata* and its reputed author, the position of the Vedas must be realized.

The word "WORD" is the nearest equivalent to convey the full significance of the word "Vedas."

Modern scholars have used the word "Vedas" to indicate four separate works—*Rig Veda*, *Yajur Veda*, *Sama Veda* and *Atharvana Veda*, each one of them voluminous; without them the pivot on which the Arya life revolved, could not be understood or described.

The Vedas are "apaurusheya" ; they are not the creation of any agency, human or divine.

They are the means for attaining happiness and self-realization which are beyond the sphere of perception or inference.

प्रत्यक्षेणानुमानेन यस्तूपायो न बुध्यते ।
दानं विदन्ति वेदेन तस्माद् वेदस्य वेदता ॥

They are called "Vedas" or "Shruti"—divine chants, which, when chanted with the appropriate cadence and accent and accompained by the appropriate rituals, manifest their divinity. The cadence and accent with which the *mantras* were and are being chanted, believed to be an essential part of their divinity have continued unbroken during the last three thousand years at least.

And when so chanted, they are believed to purify the mind and the body, heal ailments, give longevity, bring rain and perform many such miracles, and ensure victory to heroes. Even today there are thousands of Brahmans (*Srotriyas*) dedicated to the study and teaching of "Shruti" (the Vedas) in the country who can chant some parts of the WORD, and a few hundred of them can chant all its four parts. Some parts are chanted at evey religious ceremony connected with birth, death, marriage and other solemn occasions. We have also specialists in the Vedic lore who practise the healing of ailments by reciting the chants.

The institution of the Brahmacharis was the main instrument for preserving the Vedas. For a period not exceeding twelve years, the young initiate has to lead an ascetic life and recite the Vedas. Even in modern times, when a boy is invested with the sacred thread, he is inducted into the Order of Brahmacharya, though the period of training is reduced to a token period of one or three days.

In age after age, for three millennia, the Vedas have given unity to Hinduism and lent strength to its social, moral and spiritual evolution.

The Veda is our 'Rock of Ages,' as it was termed by Sri Aurobindo; it has been giving continual inspiration to religious schools, philosophical systems, social institutions, Dharma Shastras (law texts), schools of music and even to technical works like Charaka and Kautilya; even to the Integral Yoga which the Sage of Pondicherry himself propounded in the first quarter of the twentieth century.

The Vedas are characterized by the *Bhagavad Gita* as "Shabda Brahma" —the Word that is God. (VI. 44).

In giving a translation of the appropriate *Mantras*, I have taken the liberty of making a paraphrase which will emphasize their real significance.

CHAPTER 4

DVAIPAAYANA IS REBORN

FATHER and son, hand in hand, went to the Field of Ashes. It was a huge funeral ground in which hundreds of dead bodies had been cremated—a ghastly sight.

Dvaipa could see how his father's face reflected the deep anguish he felt and clung to him to show that he sympathised with him.

'Come, Dvaipa. Let us return to Godhuli,' said the Muni and added as if the boy was a friend : 'Whenever I come to this spot, I asked the Gods why I was allowed to escape death at the hands of the wicked King.' Then he continued in a low voice : 'I can see before me my disciples massacred and hear their dying moans.'

Father and son, weighed down by sorrow, walked back to the hamlet. Two days later, they returned to Godhuli.

Acharya Gautama was surprised to see the Muni returning with his son to the Godhuli *ashram*, but was very glad to learn that the Muni had decided to initiate Dvaipa into the Order of Brahmacharya as soon as the stars became favourable.

Dvaipa was all enthusiasm. He joined the inmates of the *ashram* in hanging up garlands of green leaves and in fixing stumps of banana trees around the hallowed ground where the sacred fire was kept alive day and night.

The women of the *ashram*, led by Sharmi, a buxom young woman of the village whom the Acharya had married when he founded the *ashram*, held Pangu Muni in reverence; now they fell in love with the bright, little boy with a friendly smile for all, moving about with the solemn air of a *rishi* (Vedic seer), asking interminable questions, and cheerfully working at anything that was to be done.

Dvaipa also took every opportunity to work with the womenfolk. He had an idea that if he was to be reborn, his mother would somehow suddenly appear among them.

The Muni reckoned the stars and fixed an auspicious date and time for the ceremony.

The villagers entered into the spirit of the festival and every house in the village was decorated with garlands of green leaves.

When the news reached the neighbouring villages, the men and women from them flocked to the Godhuli *ashram* to attend the ceremony of Pangu Muni's son being initiated into Brahmacharya; the professional drummers, fife-players and conch-blowers, indispensable at every festival, also came to celebrate the event.

Before the ceremony began, the Muni invoked the planets, the friendly ones for aid, the hostile ones for goodwill.

Dvaipa was disappointed when the ceremonies connected with his birth and name-giving were duly performed without his mother being there. Anyway, he saw that his father was no longer in distress as he had been at the Field of Ashes. Now that they shared the secret that they were going to rebuild Dharmakshetra, his father, as it seemed to Dvaipa, was happy.

The ceremony of initiation began by Acharya Gautama invoking the God Varuna of the skies and the waters. The seven Primeval Rishis, who, his father had said, dwelt in the heavens as stars, were duly summoned; they came symbolised by seven betel-nuts. Dvaipa was proud; after being reborn, he would surely find a place among them some day[1].

When Acharya Gautama invoked Agni, the Fire-God, and lit the sacred fire, offering ghee on it, he chanted :

> "Oh, Agni, Bestower of long life,
> Be pleased to accept my prayer.
> Drink the ghee as though it were nectar.
> Be pleased to lead this boy to old age,
> Like a father leading his son."

With appropriate *mantras*, the blessings of other Gods were also invoked. Dvaipa almost saw them in the sky; they had all gathered to welcome him into the Order of Brahmacharya.

The Muni asked Acharya Gautama to accept the office of being his son's *guru*. Dvaipa would have preferred his father to be his *guru*, but the Acharya was happy at this suggestion and after all, Father himself was the *guru* of the Acharya.

Acharya Gautama put a girdle of sacred *darbha* grass around Dvaipa with the invocation :

> "It serves truth, increases *tapas*, kills evil;
> O ! Sacred Mekhala ! I will wear you and be free from sorrows."

Then the Acharya gave a deer-skin to Dvaipa to wear and chanted :

> "Thou art the eyes of the God Savita (Sungod); thou art effulgence; I am wearing the deer-skin; give me knowledge, longevity and effulgence."

Then the Acharya stood up, facing the east, and Dvaipa repeated the *mantras* as he spoke :

> " I have found the *guru*; he is now in front of me.
> By his grace, I will conquer all evil and drive away death.
> Let him lead an austere life, filled with noble thoughts."

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[1] The ceremony of giving the sacred thread to the boy is treated as a spiritual birth; hence the said initiate is called *dvija* or Twice-born.

Then followed the dialogue between the *guru* and the *shishya*, preceptor and disciple, Dvaipa repeating the replies to the Acharya's questions :

"Why have you come, boy ?"

"I have come to you for Brahmacharya, noble Twice-born. Take me to you."

"What is your name ?"

"I am Krishna Dvaipaayana, son of Muni Paraashara."

The Acharya then said :

> "O, Surya ! (Sungod), this boy is your Brahmachari.
> This is your son; protect him;
> Let your son not die; let him live long,
> Till he attains the end of the path of righteousness."

Dvaipa's heart beat in wild excitement. His eyes beamed with joy. He was now to be reborn and enter the Order of Brahmacharya.

He was asked to stand up, holding the sacred thread stretched out from one hand to the other.

The Acharya asked Dvaipa to obtain his father's permission to wear the *yajnopavita* (the sacred thread). 'Father, may I have your permission to wear this sacred thread and enter the Order of celebate disciples as a Brahmachari ?' he asked his father.

'Yes, my son. I give you my permission', replied the Muni.

Then the Acharya bent down and talked to the Muni in a whisper. Dvaipa heard the word "mother" and looked at the women sitting there to see whether his mother was among them. He muttered to himself : 'How can I be reborn without her ?'

According to the instruction given by the Muni, the Acharya took some *darbha* grass and placed it near the *vedi*, and worshipped it by sprinkling *kum-kum* (red powder), rice and flowers.

'Dvaipa, your mother has been summoned in the *darbha* grass. She is now present,' said the Acharya. 'Ask your mother's permission. Say : "Mother, have I your permission to wear this sacred thread ?"

Dvaipa was disappointed, but was helpless and repeated the Acharya's words.

Then the Muni gave the signal. The great moment had arrived ; the Acharya recited the prayer, which Dvaipa also repeated :

> "This *yajnopavita* (sacred thread), born with Brahma, the Creator, is pure.
> It gives long life; it gives power and purity.
> I am wearing this to let it give me strength of soul and vigour of mind."

Drums sounded; fifes were played; conchs were blown. Those who were Twice-borns showered grains of rice on the Brahmachari.

The sun was shining brightly. Dvaipa looked at the Sungod and saw the radiant orb smiling; he felt assured that he would always receive his favours.

"Let these be my vows;
I will remember good and forget evil.
I will practise faith and shun disbelief.
I will honour knowledge and shun ignorance.
I will follow truth and shun falsehood.
I will lead an austere life and shun luxury."

Then the Acharya asked him : "Have you been reborn ?"

"Yes."

"Sip the water for purity."

"Yes." Dvaipa sipped the water.

"Will you perform your duties ?"

"Yes."

"Will you eat only food which you have begged for ?"

"Yes."

"Will you be obedient to your *guru* ?'

"Yes."

Dvaipa was given a *kaupina*, a single thong; a *danda*, a staff fit for his age and strength, and a gourd for carrying food or water.

Then the Acharya covered his and Dvaipa's heads with a cloth and whispered into his ear the miraculous *Gayatri mantra.*

Dvaipa's little heart, while he repeated the *mantra*, overflowed with happiness. Not only was he with his father, but he had entered the life of the Twice-born who could chant the WORD. Some day he might even converse with the Gods. As happy as a boy could be, he felt sure that he would become a sage like his great-grandfather, Vasishtha, and that he and his father would go to Dharmakshetra and rebuild it.

Dvaipa prostrated himself before the Acharya and his father, and before everyone present who was Twice-born, and the wives of the Acharya and other Twice-borns.

Then all the Twice-borns present began to chant the *mantra* to secure the well-being of all :

"May the far-famed God Indra, bless
all with well-being;
May the God Surya who knows all,
bless all with well-being;
May the Divine Garud, destroyer of
inauspicious things, favour all
with well-being;
May Brihaspati, the lord of divine
wisdom, bring well-being to all."

Dvaipa had heard his father chant this hymn of blessing and had stored it in his memory, and now without the least hesitation and without a single lapse, he chanted it with the proper accent.

The Twice-borns present were amazed to see the six-year-old boy joining them in chanting the *mantra* with the proper cadence and accent, his child's voice having a distinct ring from those of the adults.

Then the Muni drew Dvaipa to him and hugged him. 'Dvaipa, you are the descendant of Vaisishtha, the divine seer. As such, you have to take special vows', he said and then recited the vows, which were repeated by Dvaipa :

> " I will refrain from inflicting injury;
> I will not appropriate another man's wealth;
> I will always speak the truth and nothing else;
> I will give away anything I have to any worthy man who needs it,
> if a right time should come to do so;
> I will refrain from talking about young women;
> I will cut short the flow of greed and desire;
> I will worship the Gods and my Forefathers;
> I will live for the WORD;
> I will seek the favour of the Gods who have the WORD."

At the conclusion of the ceremony, all the Twice-borns chanted the prayer to secure the well-being of all:

> "May each one by happy;
> May each one be pure;
> May each one seek goodness;
> May each one escape from unhappiness."

To end the ceremony the villagers danced and sang. Then a fine banquet was spread forth.

A little after midday, Dvaipa and Paila went about the village, begging for alms. The Pangu Muni was held in great reverence and Dvaipa had won much love, so that there was not a woman in the village who was not impatient to give the prodigy a part of the food she had cooked. His open, affectionate smile, and the solemn air with which he gave blessings, made him so adorable that he was dubbed "the Little Muni."

When Dvaipa started on his begging rounds, the children from the villages followed him, more for the fun of it. Then a predicament faced him. His gourd was full after begging at two or three houses. Indeed, he did not really have to beg, because the women were waiting for him at their doorsteps. Rather than disappoint them, he turned to the children following him and gave them whatever he had.

He went from house to house, the children following him, and whenever his gourd was full, he distributed the food to them.

When Dvaipa returned to the *ashram*, his gourd was empty. The Muni was surprised. 'Did no one give you any food ?' he asked.

'Everyone did more than I needed,' replied Dvaipa.

'Then where has it gone ?'

'I gave it to the children who were with me,' replied Dvaipa.

'What will you eat yourself ?'

'I will go without food. Where is the harm ?' replied Dvaipa. 'Mother always used to fast once a fortnight. The poor children were so hungry that I could not deny them what they needed.

As he said this, a few hungry children ran up to him, asking him to give them food, with their hands stretched out and their eyes expectant. Dvaipa was in utter despair; he had nothing in his gourd to give them. He was moved to tears in his helplessness, but he controlled himself. He prayed to Savita, the Sungod, the giver of life, who had taken him under his protection, with all the passionate earnestness he was capable of.

'Oh, God Savita, keep me without food, but give me enough to satisfy these children. You smiled at me; in doing so, you assured me of your favour. Help me.' The prayer rose from the depth of his heart. 'What shall I give the children, for whom nothing is left in my gourd ?'

Suddenly he felt his gourd grow heavy. When he looked at it to find out what had made it so, he was taken aback. The God had heard his prayer; there was enough food to satisfy the hungry children !

Dvaipa was awe-struck as he distributed the food to the hungry children. 'Father, he said, 'how did my gourd become full ? What happened ?'

Muni Paraashara had seen the miracle of the gourd's being filled. His heart was overflowing with joy. He had been waiting for a sign from the Gods; now it was given. The failures and misfortunes of his life would be transmuted into the triumphs of his son.

He threw his arms around Dvaipa and whispered : 'My son, give away what you have, and the Gods will give you in an ample measure.'

CHAPTER 5

WHAT DVAIPA LEARNED FROM HIS FATHER

DURING the rains, the Muni, with his companions, stayed at the Godhuli *ashram.*

When the rainy season was over, they started on their annual round of the *ashrams* of the Muni's disciples.

The twelve years for which Dvaipa had to remain a Brahmachari, a celibate disciple, were a period of intense training for him, and in spite of the rigorous life he lived, he was extremely happy. His reverence and love for his father increased day after day.

They travelled in boats or on foot, performing the daily rituals and living on whatever hospitality the hamlets offered.

When passing through jungles, his father would chant the WORD. The others would join him if they knew the chants; if they did not, he would teach them the words, cadence and accent of the new chants till they mastered them. Dvaipa, with his phenomenal memory, however, would begin to chant the new *mantras* accurately after hearing them twice or thrice.

A fascinating world opened out before Dvaipa as he learned the new *mantras.*

There were *mantras* to invoke a God individually; *mantras* to secure the favour of the Gods collectively.

There were *mantras* to secure happiness, righteous living or victory in war; *mantras* to propitiate the Gods, particularly to Indra for strength to overcome enemies, and to Maruti to escape winds or storms; above all, *mantras* to invoke the Great God, Varuna, the Lord of the skies and the waters, whose *Rita* (Cosmic Order) upheld the Universe, and who watched the past, the present and the future through countless eyes shining at night.

There were also *mantras* to ward off the God of Death; *mantras* to cure sickness or to save one from serpents; *mantras* to win a good wife or a good husband.

During the day, Dvaipa was never happier than when his father pointed out birds with glorious plumage or flowers of a beautiful hue, or gathered herbs which, he explained, would heal a wound or cure an ailment if used with the appropriate *mantras.* Once the herbs were collected, Asval would put them in a bag which he carried, slung from his shoulder.

At night, except during the rains, they would sleep under the open skies, each on his deer-skin, around the sacred fire after invoking the Fire-God to protect them from the beasts of prey.

Before they went to sleep, however, Dvaipa would lie on his deerskin by his father's side, asking questions about the mysteries of the stars.

In their journeyings they avoided highways, large settlements and the headquarters of the petty chiefs who, during the chaos following the war, had set themselves up as little kings.

His father's aim in travelling from *ashram* to *ashram*, as Dvaipa perceived when he outgrew his boyhood, was to keep closely knit as integral parts of the parental *ashram* those *ashrams* founded on the banks of the Yamuna by his disciples who had escaped the holocaust.

Every *ashram*, when they visited it, gave his father a warm welcome, for they all loved him and had awaited him impatiently. These visits also provided the bond between the different *ashrams* and maintained a common discipline.

As he grew up, Dvaipa was lost in admiration of his father's ways of winning the love of the *ashramites* and teaching them how to live righteously.

Each *ashram* was headed by an Acharya, a senior disciple of his father's. The other inmates of the *ashram* were generally adult disciples who had escaped the holocaust; a few Brahmacharis in different stages of training; also the wives of the Acharya and the adults—young women from the neighbouring villages whom the Acharya and the adults had taken to themselves as wives; the children born of such marriages, and the dependants and their families from the surrounding villages.

In front of the principal cottage was the hallowed spot, in the centre of which was built the sacred fire, kept burning day and night. Behind was the cattle-shed where the cows of the *ashram* were kept.

The life of each *ashram* revolved round the worship of the sacred fire and the chant of the divine WORD.

Where an *ashram* was headed by a comparatively untrained Acharya, the discipline was lax, the Arya code of life being often disregarded: the WORD was chanted without regard for the proper phrases, cadence and accent.

As Dvaipa grew up, he discovered how wonderfully his father dealt with the erring *ashramites*. He would never find fault, never rebuke anyone, never point out lapses. All that he did was, from the first day they arrived, to perform the right acts himself and chant the WORD properly. The inmates would then begin to imitate him.

The womenfolk of the *ashrams*, all drawn from the surrounding villages were generally lazy, getting up later than the *brahma* *muhurta*—the sacred hour when the Twice-borns had to invoke Usha, the Goddess of Dawn. They took their own time to perform their services, gossiping and giggling all the time.

His father, without a word of reprimand, would quietly go to the cattle-shed himself, accompained by him and the two disciples, clean it out thoroughly, and wash the cows and get them ready for milking. The womenfolk, shamed into activity, would rush to the cattle-shed, pretending to do what had already been done.

Then his father, accompanied by him, Asval and Paila, would take his bathe and perform the morning rituals. The Acharya and his disciples would shake off their lethargy and hurriedly join them.

Then they would sit around the sacred fire, and his father would begin to chant the WORD, his fine voice creating an atmosphere of awesome solemnity. The Twice-born inmates had a hard time keeping up with his father, and using the correct words and the appropriate cadence and accent.

The residents of the neighbouring villages invariably looked forward to his father's annual visit, often with impatience. When he arrived at an *ashram*, they would flock in large numbers to offer their salutations and receive his blessing, bringing with them whatever they could as an offering to Agni, the Fire-God. A community spirit would then cement the bond between the *ashram* and the villagers.

His father would heal the ailing, resolve domestic or family feuds, and also patch up the strife between rival parties in the villages. His father's astrological forecasts were sought by men and women alike.

Later in life, Dvaipa was to understand the secret of his father's influence over men; it flowed from his insistence that the *ashramites* were to live in the open air without any possessions, and that foodstuffs should be stored in the *ashram* only if they would last no more than three days.

When visiting one of the *ashrams*, his father discovered that the womenfolk had kept more foodstuffs than were required for three days. He quietly took the surplus foodstuffs and distributed them among the villagers.

One experience Dvaipa was never to forget. When they arrived at one *ashram*, it had no stock of foodstuffs; the villagers had not made any offerings. Even Dvaipa and Paila, the two Brahmacharis, were not given any alms when they went to the villagers; the doors were closed against them.

His father said that the Gods wanted them to live only on the milk of the cows in the *ashram*. When the milk was not sufficient for all, his father gave up his share of the milk to the children; others followed suit. However, during those days, his father saw to it that the prescribed routine was carried out scrupulously. The villagers felt the rebuke and the next day they brought food for the *ashramites*.

Some *ashrams* were found to have earned the hostility of the neighbouring villagers. His father's invariable comment was: 'If you are badly treated, you must have deserved it.'

At one place, when they arrived, they found the Acharya and his disciples making preparations to shift the *ashram*.

'Why are you leaving this place?' his father asked them.

'The surroundings are not congenial,' replied the Acharya. 'The villagers disturb our prayers; sometimes they pour water over the sacred fire; sometimes they steal the cows of the *ashram*.'

His father put an affectionate hand on the Acharya's shoulder and said: 'Why should you give up this *ashram*? What better spot can there be than this one to test our faith? We have invoked the Gods here; we have hallowed the spot by chanting the WORD. The place has become a *tirtha* where people ought to have come in faith to be uplifted to righteous living.'

The Acharya folded his hands and said: 'The people are wicked. We have tried to win them over, but have not succeeded.'

Dvaipa's father said in a most affectionate tone: 'If we cannot win over the residents of the surrounding villages to righteous living by our dedicated life, we must have failed in our duty as Twice-borns—to study, to teach and to show the way to *Dharma*—righteous living; we must have chanted the WORD without accuracy or offended Agni, the Fire-God, by not worshipping the sacred fire according to the prescribed rituals.'

'The villagers will kill us one of these days,' said the Acharya hesitatingly.

'If the villagers want to beat you to death, continue to chant the WORD and go to the Land of the God of Death of your own free will; that is what the venerable Vasishtha, my grandfather, did when the wicked King came to kill him,' said Dvaipa's father.

Sometimes the *ashramites* lived in fear of wild beasts. His father said to them: 'You must tame the wild beasts by affection. If the beasts attack you, don't run away. If you do so, they will kill you, thinking that you are their enemies. However, if you invoke the Fire-God and worship the sacred fire day and night, the beasts will go way of themselves.'

In the eighth year of their journeyings, Paila completed his twelve years as a celibate disciple and at one of the *ashrams*, the ceremony to induct him into the Order of the Householder was performed with the appropriate ritual.

A strong bond of affection had grown up between Paila and Dvaipa. During these years, Paila was often in distress; he could never learn unfamiliar chants with ease and accuracy. Soon a stage was reached when Paila had to request Dvaipa to coach him. Paila was modest; he had no conceit; he began to look upon Dvaipa as his little *guru.*

Year after year, for ten years, they went from *ashram* to *ashram* on the banks of the Yamuna.

It was in the tenth year of their journeying that his father took the Acharyas of the different *ashrams* into his confidence about rebuilding Dharmakshetra and said : 'The next two years, we propose to go on a pilgrimage to Badri. Do any of your disciples want to accompany us on this arduous journey ?'

Many young inmates offered themselves, but his father would not have more than twenty Brahmacharis with him, one from each *ashram*.

By easy stages, his father with him and his disciples—now they were twenty-four in all—proceeded on their way, staying for a few days at each of the *ashrams* on the banks of the sacred Ganga set up by the Twice-borns who had fled from Dharmakshetra.

These *ashrams* were entirely different from those on the banks of the Yamuna. Not only the sages who once presided over the *ashrams* in Dharmakshetra, but their senior disciples, had died or had been killed by the Haihayas. Their disciples of the third generation had drifted away from the code of Arya behaviour. To them, Dharmakshetra and its high traditions of righteous living were things of a half-forgotten past. The memory of the great rishis—Vasishtha, Viswamitra, Jamadagni, Angeeras, Shunashepa—had receded into the background. War had uprooted tradition. They somehow managed to live by receiving a precarious sustenance from the villagers and the petty chiefs who had set themselves up in authority on the collapse of the Arya kingdoms.

When they arrived, the *ashramites* gave a half-hearted welcome to his father; they could not ignore him; he had become a legend, a great teacher who had faced the wrath of Sahasrarjuna. However, when they found his father and his disciples living a strictly disciplined life and insisting on chanting the WORD meticulously, they thought him a nuisance.

His father urged these *ashramites* to rely upon the spontaneous loyalty of the villagers surrounding the *ashrams*. Dvaipa sensed that some of them considered his father a fool for such advice; they dared not challenge his learning nor his moral authority, but behind his back, he was sure, they laughed at his father.

During this period, they travelled into the Himalayas, and visited the *ashram* of the ancient sages, Nara and Narayana at Badri among the snow-clad mountains. They also went on a pilgrimage to Kailas, the home of Mahadeva, the God of gods, who had so pre-eminent a place in the pantheon of the Aryas and others as Ishan, the Lord of all.

Dvaipa was now eighteen. During the twelve years after his initiation, he had not only learnt the WORD in its three parts—*Rig Veda*, *Yajur Veda* and *Sama Veda*—but also the fragments of the Atharvana lore which his father knew and he had acquired mastery of the rituals.

He had developed a personality which was as inspiring as his father's.

His body was now powerful and thickset like his father's; his forehead was broad and his dark eyes beamed with kindliness. His practice of serving food to others before he took his own or going hungry when he had no surplus food sufficient for the visitors, brought him great love. He had acquired for his own part, a complete hold over the *ashrams* founded by his father's disciples.

In the last month of his twelve years of Brahmacharya, his father and his companions returned to Godhuli to perform the ceremony which was to induct him into the Order of the Householder.

CHAPTER 6

VISIT TO KALPI ISLET

FATHER and son, Asval and Paila, with twenty *Brahmacharis* from the *ashrams*, made preparations to set out for Dharmakshetra. The Muni fully realised the difficulties in the way of such an ambitious adventure. But he had faith in the Gods, and after the God Surya had replenished Dvaipa's gourd to feed the hungry children, he had no doubt that the Gods were anxious to reclaim Dharmakshetra.

During their journeyings, they had met a few men who had visited Dharmakshetra; according to them, it was now a wilderness called Kurukshetra because the Kurus had finally vanquished the invading hordes of Haihayas there. The sacred Sarasvati had also dried up in parts, they said, leaving a series of lakes connected by shallow channels.

Day after day during their journeyings, father and son and disciples discusssd how to set up Dharmakshetra afresh; how to invoke the Gods to restore the sacred Sarasvati to its pristine grandeur; how to secure protection against wild beasts and Rakshasas; how to build the *ashrams* and to attract the Twice-borns from Aryavarta to resurrect Dharma (righteous living); and how to restore those happy relations between the Aryas and the Gods that had existed during the days of Grandfather Vasishtha, and finally how to restore the WORD in its entirety.

These problems weighed heavily on Asval; he always saw difficulties even when there were none.

To all the difficulties the Muni had only one reply, firm and unwavering; they were living for the WORD and the WORD would protect them.

Before departing from Godhuli on their dangerous mission, the Muni accompanied by Dvaipa, Acharya Gautama and the disciples went to pay a farewell visit to the Field of Ashes.

When he came to the Field, the Muni shed a tear for his massacred disciples, for the women who were robbed of their virtue or had flung themselves into the fire before the demons could violate them, for the cows that had been killed.

He was now old and had no hope of returning to this place.

His only aim in life was to reconstruct Dharmakshetra; to hear it resounding with the sacred chants of the *Srotriyas*, the Twice-borns dedicated to the WORD.

When they started to return to Godhuli, a pack of wolves rushed out of their lair, baring their fangs and howling. Every one of them ran for his life; only the Muni could not run as briskly as the others because of his lame leg.

Before anyone could realise what was happening, the wolves had attacked the Muni, torn his limbs apart and dragged his body a little farther away. His cry for help was smothered as a wolf dug its fangs into his throat.

The others, with their staffs upraised, ran back to where the Muni lay. The wolves, frightened, ran away. What was left on the ground was the mangled corpse of the Muni whom they revered.

Dvaipa broke down; a piteous cry escaped him. Overborne by grief, he flung himself on the dead body of his father. 'Father, Father, Father,' he cried, as sobs convulsed him. Acharya Gautama raised him from the body of his father.

Dvaipa would not let the Acharya carry the body. He gently lifted his father's body dripping with blood, as if it was the body of a little child; overwhelmed though he was by grief, he insisted on carrying it.

All the inmates of the *ashram* at Godhuli and the grief-stricken villagers, shocked at what had happened, came to have a last *darshan* of their beloved Pangu Muni.

Sorrowfully, Dvaipa placed his father's body on the funeral pyre and performed the obsequial rites, with all the Twice-borns chanting the appropriate *mantras*, consigning the noble sage to Agni, the Fire-God.

For twelve days, the *ashram* and the villages mourned the death of the Muni.

On the twelfth day, Dvaipa ceremonially cut the consecrated rice ball, symbolising his father's spirit, into two;Muni Paraashara left the Land of the Dead to join his Forefathers in their Land.

For twelve days, Dvaipa was silent with grief, his eyes tearless, his lips firmly set. He was summoning all his strength to face a life without his father, who had been a living divinity to him.

On the thirteenth day, Acharya Gautama spoke to Dvaipa: 'Dvaipaayana, don't think now of going to Dharmakshetra. This is your own *ashram*. Whatever I am is due to the revered Muni, your father, who was more to me than my own father. You must now preside over this *ashram*; in spite of your age, you are fully equipped for such a role.'

Dvaipa folded his hands in humility. 'Best among *gurus*, I am your disciple. This *ashram* is the only home I have, but please let me try to realize my father's last wish. He has gone to the Land of the Forefathers, but still he is beckoning me to Dharmakshetra. I must go there.'

Acharya Gautama made a final appeal. 'Dvaipaayana, you do not know the hazards you will have to face. If what travellers tell me is true, wild beasts roam about during the day and make the night hideous by their howls; there are no *ashrams* there, and not an echo of the WORD is heard.'

Dvaipa touched the feet of his *guru* and said : 'Noblest of *gurus*, I have pledged myself to Father that I will help him re-build Dharmakshetra. For twelve years we have discussed the matter and I cannot forswear my pledge to him. Please forgive me and let me go my own way.'

The Acharya raised a doubt. 'After your father had met with disaster, none of his disciples is prepared to go to Dharmakshetra.'

'They are right; I have no claim on their obedience.'

'Will you go alone ?' asked the Acharya.

'Yes. Whatever happens, I will go to where he would have gone, had he been alive.' Then he was silent for a moment and continued : 'I don't mind going to the Land of the Forefathers and joining Father there. But I cannot break my vow. I don't want anyone with me. I will steal away tomorrow night and take the boat to where I want to go.'

'Where will you go ? The boat that is spending tomorrow night here, goes the other way, down stream,' said the Acharya.

'I will obey you in everything,' Dvaipa beseeched the Acharya. 'But please, let me do what I want on this occasion.'

'The revered Muni's death has been a warning from the Gods, Dvaipaayana. Don't you feel that ?'

'On the contrary, they have given me strength, Gurudeva. Father never returned to the islet after he brought me here. However, he gave me a promise that before we left for Dharmakshetra, he would let me go to the Kalpi islet and pay a farewell visit to Mother. I must get the blessing of Mother. I am going to take the boat which starts the day after tomorrow. Whatever happens to me, please, as my *guru*, give me your blessing. May the Gods give me strength to fulfil the object that Father had pledged himself to.'

Before dawn on the day fixed, Dvaipa rolled up his deer-skin, took his staff and gourd, and accompanied by the Acharya, proceeded to the bank of the river.

The boatman greeted Dvaipa and gave him a hearty welcome to his boat.

As soon as the boat began to sail, the splash was heard of someone jumping into the water and swimming towards the boat with vigour. The boatman slowed down the boat and soon Paila was clambering up its side.

'Dvaipa, you must not leave me behind,' said Paila. 'Wherever you go, I will come with you.' Dvaipa held him in an embrace, wet to the skin though he was.

The next morning, the boat reached Kalpi. Dvaipa looked at his grandfather's islet and was dismayed. There was no sign of life on it.

He told the boatman to pick them up on the return journey two days later. Then Dvaipa and Paila jumped into the water as the boat halted and waded through the shallow waters to the islet.

The pillar to which his family boats used to be tied, had disappeared. Two of the huts had also disappeared; the third one had collapsed.

Dvaipa offered a silent prayer to the Gods; they were seasoning him for facing greater trials.

Paila, who had followed Dvaipa, put an affectionate arm around him. Dvaipa did not utter a syllable nor shed a tear.

Then they went to the fishing village on the other side of the creek. It was evident that during the twelve years that had passed, it had not prospered nor its population maintained its strength.

Dvaipa came across two young men, one cleaning fish and the other stitching a net, whom he did not recognise. The young fishermen respectfully saluted Dvaipa and Paila, seeing from their dress that they were holy men. Dvaipa blessed them, but could not summon up courage to ask them about his people.

A middle-aged fisherman accosted them respectfully. 'My salutation, venerable Sir. What do you want ?'

'Nothing', answered Dvaipa and blessed him with an outstretched arm.

'May I offer you food? You must be hungry', said the fisherman.

They accepted the invitation and went to his hut. His mother, shortsighted and shrunk, peered at them, roofing her weary eyes with her hands.

'Mother', Dvaipa accosted her, 'where are the people who used to live on the islet ?'

'Oh, they !' exclaimed the woman contemptuously. 'They have gone. The curse of Mother Yamuna was on them'. She touched the tips of her ears to ward off the danger of the curse.

'The curse ! Why ?' asked Dvaipa, surprised.

'Yes. There was a certain Pangu Muni who came here every year to meet those people. By his blessing, they prospered', said the woman. Dvaipa felt a new wave of sadness oppressing him. The old woman continued : 'They offended the Pangu Muni. They drove away his son and invited Mother Yamuna's curse.'

'What followed ?' asked Dvaipa.

'Their daughter was the cause of all their misfortune. She was a vile woman. No decent fisherman would marry her. If anyone had married her, she would have brought the curse on him and his family.'

Dvaipa felt his throat choking, but controlling himself with a great effort, asked : 'What happened to the daughter ?'

'One day that wretched girl ferried a king to the islet. I don't really know whether he was a king, but he was dressed like a king and had shining arms. Next time he came in a chariot and took the shameless girl away with him.'

'What about her parents ?' asked Dvaipa, suppressing a sigh.

'They all left with the king's men who came in bullock-carts', said the old fisherwoman in disgust.

'Do you know where they have gone ?' asked Dvaipa.

'We have heard nothing about them, nor do we want to,' said the old woman and continued: 'Old Jaruth was as shameless as his daughter. He sold his daughter.'

'Did nobody go to live on the islet after Jaruth and his family left it ?' asked Dvaipa.

'Nobody ventured to occupy the huts vacated by Jaruth and his family', said the fisherwoman and again touched the tips of her ears as a precaution. 'It is an accursed place. Our village also came under the curse.'

'Why do you say that ?' asked Dvaipa.

'Because Jaruth and his wives drove away Pangu Muni. Jaruth's wife, Chandodari was my cousin, but she always hated me.'

'Did you know Pangu Muni ?' asked Dvaipa.

'Oh ! I knew him very well,' said the old fisherwoman and sighed. 'If he only came here just once, he would lift the curse from this place by lighting the sacred fire and invoking the Gods.'

'The Venerable Muni has gone to the Land of the Forefathers. I was his disciple. Could I lift the curse ?' asked Dvaipa.

In the evening, Dvaipa and Paila re-crossed the creek to sleep near the hut which had collapsed. Dvaipa wanted to sleep where he would have slept, had his mother been living there.

The next day, in the presence of the assembled fisher-folk of the village, Dvaipa and Paila, with due ceremony, lit the sacred fire, invoked the blessing of the Lord Varuna, the God Agni, the god Surya and Mother Yamuna on that village and lifted the curse.

At Dvaipa's request, the old fisherwoman gave him a small water pot of mud and a clay saucer to fit into its mouth, with a little jaggery and lime. He took a leaf from a *peepul* tree growing there, put it in the mud pot, and closed its mouth with the saucer, cementing it with a plaster of jaggery mixed with lime.

Then he placed the pot gently on the river with a deep sigh.

'What are you doing, Dvaipaayana ?' asked Paila, overcome with curiosity at this strange ceremony.

Dvaipa's eyes were full of sorrow. In a voice fraught with emotion, he said : 'Mother and I had come to an understanding that if she got angry with me, I was to offer a leaf of the *peepul* tree silently; then she would accept it as a token of forgiveness. If I became angry, she was to offer a leaf to me and I would accept it similarly.'

'But why send this pot floating along the river ?' asked Paila.

'We don't know where Mother is,' said Dvaipa and for a while looked at the river. 'I will leave it to Mother Yamuna to carry the pot to wherever Mother is. She will then forgive me for going away and leaving her behind.'

On the third morning, the boat returned to the islet, to fetch Dvaipa and Paila. The fisher-folk of the village, with due salutations, invited them to visit them again.

'I am not sure whether I will return. But, even if I return, mother,' he addressed the old fisherwoman, 'perhaps we may not meet again. Mother, will you do me a favour?' he asked in a plaintive voice.

'I will do whatever you tell me,' replied the woman. 'Little Muni, you have lifted the curse and saved us.'

'Then, please, don't think ill of the fisher-girl.'

'Oh! She was a shameless girl. No good mother would have let her child be parted from her in that way,' she said.

'I am the son of Matsyagandhaa,' said Dvaipa.

The old woman was taken aback and afraid of the Little Muni cursing them, said: 'Please forgive us. Don't be angry with us. Give us your blessing.'

'You have my blessing. But remember, the fisher-girl parted with the boy only for his good.'

Before boarding the boat, Dvaipa stood on the edge of the islet and looked mournfully at the river—Mother Yamuna, who had cradled him. The sun shone warmly on the waters; he looked at both her banks, as he used to do; on the opposite bank, the same trees were overhanging the water.

Sadly, he fixed his gaze on the western horizon where the waters of the river met the sky, as he used to do when a child.

For a moment, he found himself in the old, unforgotten world. He looked back, waiting for his mother to come to him with sprightly steps. A pang shot through his heart. Mother had gone; where and with whom, he would never know. He would never hear her calling him "Krishna."

For a moment emptiness came over him. No longer could he be the little boy who waited here for his father and he would never meet his father again till he himself went to the Land of the Forefathers.

He invoked the Lord Varuna to keep his mother happy, wherever she was, and look after his father in the Land of the Forefathers.

As he chanted the *mantras* inviting the Gods to look after his father and mother, his heart was filled with confidence.

He was not alone. The WORD was with him. And Dharmakshetra had to be rebuilt.

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CHAPTER 7

THE FIELD OF WOLVES

DVAIPAAYANA and Paila left the boat in which they had travelled at a convenient place, from where they started their journey on foot.

Paila now looked upon Dvaipaayana with worship. But he was a born grumbler; when irritated, he complained against the Gods, the seers, even the Muni himself in mock disgust.

They were boys, after all; whenever they felt disspirited, they would run a race, climb trees, crack jokes, reminisce over the years they had spent with Muni Paraashara or invent fanciful stories.

On their journey, they lived on the precarious hospitality of the villagers. However, when that was not forthcoming, they ate wild fruits: sometimes they went without food and satisfied themselves with a joke which, though they had cracked it a hundred times, was never stale.

Paila would say: 'Best of *gurus*, your gourd is always full of food, but you eat all of it yourself rather than share it with me.' Then he would raise his eyes to the heavens: 'Oh, God Surya (Sun God), what is the use of having a selfish *guru* like this who eats to his own satisfaction and leaves his disciple hungry?'

In response, Dvaipaayana would assume the solemn air of an old rishi and reply: 'Son, "you will never become a good *guru* unless you are a good disciple," as the venerable Muni Paraashara said. But see, the Gods are great. My gourd is full of food. Take as much as you want.' He would extend his empty gourd to Paila, who would make a gesture of eating the food from it. Then he would rub his hands over his stomach, saying 'Ah, today I have eaten too much.' After which, they would laugh.

Paila could never understand the miracle of the hungry children and complained about it too. 'Why should the Gods give you food for the hungry children and not for me? They have no pity on poor Paila who spends the whole day and half the night invoking them.'

Dvaipaayana would then assume the air of an elder and would reply: 'My son, "the Gods will never give you food when you want it for yourself," as the venerable Muni Paraashara said.' Then again both of them would laugh.

However, Dvaipaayana would repeatedly assure Paila: 'When we have an *ashram* of our own, we will feed the hungry before we eat ourselves. We will leave it to the Gods to keep us alive. It is their business to see that we, who live by the WORD, do not die.'

As they went along, they chanted the WORD, invoking the Gods to help them to restore Dharmakshetra. Often they tried to rearrange the chants which had been taught them by the Muni.

It was not difficult to classify the chants handed down by the school of seers who once flourished on the banks of the river Sarasvati. They were invocations and prayers for divine favour—*Riks*. Some *mantras* were to be chanted to invest sacrificial sessions with divinity—*Yajuh*; others to be chanted so as to give a musical effect to the cadence—*Sama*. These formed the *Trayi Vidya*, three-fold WORD.

However, Dvaipaayana found great difficulty in arranging the fragments of *mantras* which, his father said, formed part of the lore of the Atharvans.

These chants gave miraculous powers to charms, herbs and amulets; they could also overcome enemies, kill enemies, ward off dangers, arrest decay, secure love, drive out demons, forecast the future and effect cures.

According to his father, these chants were in the keeping of a distinct group of rishis called the Bhrigu-Angiras or Atharvan-Angiras, who held themselves aloof from the other seers of Dharmakshetra. According to them, the WORD was four-fold.

During the war, these Bhrigu-Angirases had receded into the inaccessible forests. In this connection, his father had spoken once or twice of a very powerful rishi called Maha Atharvan Jaabaali.

Dvaipaayana decided to learn these miraculous chants from some master of the Atharvana lore after settling down in Dharmakshetra.

On the way they made enquiries from the villagers as to where Kurukshetra was and were often given directions, most of which were wrong. And the tales which the villagers told of what they called the "Field of Wolves" were frightening.

Ultimately, they reached a vast forest with a thorny undergrowth, giant trees and wild creepers. There were no well-trodden paths going into it, only trails made by wild beasts.

They proceeded along the bank of the river Sarasvati which the Vedic seers invoked as the "Divine Mother of knowledge." She was no longer the flood of waters which they had lauded in the *mantras*, but only a shallow channel connecting five distinct lakes. They shuddered; these were the five lakes known as "Syamantak Panchakas," which Parashu Raama had filled with the blood of enemies during the war.

This "Field of Righteousness," as they called it, was a gruesome sight, more awesome than the Field of Ashes. Bones of men and horses, and broken parts of chariots lay scattered all over it. Ghastly skulls stared at them through eyeless sockets. At some places, there were remnants of what had once been huts, now no more than heaps of rotting bamboos. There was no trace of any human being.

They selected a spot on the margin of one of the lakes, cleared it, collected dry faggots, set up a *vedi* (altar) and built the sacred fire. They also collected wild fruits and nuts as offerings, and for their food.

It was evening by the time the rituals were over. After their meal, they spread their deer-skins near the fire and retired for the night.

It was a wintry night, and as it advanced, they wrapped their deer-skins around their bodies and lay on the ground.

Paila, completely exhausted by the journey, went to sleep at once. Not so Dvaipaayana; he lay awake, thinking of the Dharmakshetra which he was going to restore to its pristine grandeur; of the holy smoke from the sacrificial fires rising to the sky; of the Twice-borns studying and teaching the WORD, upholding righteous living.

The silence was only disturbed by the ageless night voices, the rustling of leaves, the soft, low music of the river and occasionally the howls of wild beasts stalking their prey.

Little by little Dvaipaayana's eyes became accustomed to the darkness of the moonless night and began to distinguish trees and the indistinct ghost-like forms of beasts.

After a while, Dvaipaayana, half asleep, had a nightmare. The night was filled with anguish. H man hands and feet were twisting and turning to find repose; moans were issuing from the mouths of men who had been killed in the war.

A razor-sharp breeze began to blow. Paila, though asleep, pulled up his legs and folded his arms over his chest; sighs escaped him. Dvaipaayana took the deer-skin in which he was wrapped and spread it over Paila. He himself sat near the *vedi*, seeking warmth from the sacred fire, his legs pulled up, his arms locked over them.

Suddenly he heard a voice calling him: 'Krishna, where are you? Why don't you come?' He was thrilled; the voice was that of his mother. He rubbed his eyes and looked around to convince himself that there was no other human being nearby except Paila. The voice—clear and impatient—was that of his mother from wherever she was. He felt suffocated. 'Mother, where are you? God Surya, lead me to her,' he prayed.

He was now fully awake and saw a pair of bright eyes full of malevolence fixed on him from across the embers of the *vedi*; they must be those of a bear, he thought. He could also see dark forms moving close to the fire or walking away. He put more dried twigs on the fire and fanned it.

He waited and waited to hear his mother's voice again, but was disappointed. Yet he was sure that she was waiting for him somewhere—he knew not where. Tears of helplessness sprang to his eyes.

The memory of that beloved voice filled him with sadness. His heart throbbed with impatience to meet her, though he realized that to try to find her was a hopeless quest. He did not know whether she was alive or dead; however, the more he thought of her, the more he was convinced that she wanted him. 'Oh Gods, show me the way to her,' he muttered, his heart filled with anguish.

When it was twilight, he saw rabbits sitting on their haunches and fixing on him their little eyes beneath their pinkish eyelids, as they warmed themselves at the sacred fire; deer stood, head lowered looking at him from across the fire; wolves stalked at a distance, unable to make out whether the silent figure sitting in front of the fire, with its arms and legs locked together was a potential danger or a ready victim.

Paila woke up and saw the animals gazing at Dvaipaayana. His heart was frozen with fear. He closed his eyes and clung to Dvaipaayana.

Dvaipaayana put more twigs on the fire, which emitted flames. They sat there clinging to each other, both the deer-skins covering them.

The forest awoke to the chirrup of birds. The wolves disappeared into the undergrowth.

Dvaipaayana stood up, stretched himself, and accompanied by Paila, went to have his bath in the lake. 'Let us perform our ritual as usual and collect wild fruits,' he said.

After the ritual and the worship of the sacred fire, they ate the fruits. Paila, however, was not able to shake off his fear. 'Where do we go from here? Let us return,' he said.

'Why should we return'? asked Dvaipaayana, eyes widening in surprise. 'We may go away for a while, but we will have to be here again to restore Dharmakshetra.'

'We cannot. This wretched place is cursed by the Gods and the seers,' said Paila.

Dvaipaayana shook his head. 'You are wrong. It is the Field of Righteousness. I can hear the echoes of the WORD chanted here and sense the holy smoke issuing from hundreds of altars.'

'That is an illusion,' said Paila. 'You can actually only hear the howls of the wolves and see foxes hunting rabbits.'

'Well, then, our flesh will provide a delicacy for the wolves,' said Dvaipaayana laughing and he added: 'I would now like you to go to the Godhuli *ashram*. I will send for you when everything is ready for rebuilding Dharmakshetra.'

'There is something wrong with you,' said Paila in mock disgust.

'No, there is something right in here,' said Dvaipaayana and tapped his forehead. 'I have given a pledge to Father to restore the Field of Righteousness, and I now have a clear idea how it is to be done.'

'There is no chance whatever of your doing that,' said Paila in despair. 'You will very soon join your forefathers. Then I will drown myself in the lake. No one can live here.'

'That is what we have come to do, Paila,' replied Dvaipaayana with his broad smile.

'Now that you are bent on destroying both of us, I have a suggestion to make,' said Paila. 'I propose that you immediately send me to the Land of Yama (the God of Death), so that I know where I am.' He was caustic. 'It would be interesting; you give me a blow on the head and kill me.'

'No. I want you to live, Paila. That is why I am asking you to return to Godhuli till I send for you,' said Dvaipaayana.

Paila pressed his palm against his forehead. 'Poor Paila is in a sorry plight. He cannot abandon you in this forest; on the other hand, he cannot live with a mad *guru* who is bent upon a foolish adventure,' he said piteously. 'I am sure, I am going to be eaten by the wolves. Then you will be sorry to have brought me here.'

Dvaipaayana smiled and patted Paila on the back affectionately. 'Paila, don't feel heart-broken. It is not a foolish venture. We cannot teach *dharma* without having an authoritative source. That will make it necessary to restore Dharmakshetra,' he said and smiled. 'I know that you do not share my faith. That was why I wanted to leave Godhuli myself, leaving you behind.'

'All right, all right,' said Paila. He could not help harping upon his death. 'Do what you like. But if I die, you will be responsible for my death, and the Lord Varuna, who sees everything, will never forgive you for the sin of killing a Twice-born.'

Dvaipaayana laughed merrily. 'Evidently you have fallen in love with Yama, the God of Death. So, I will cheerfully send you to the Land of the Forefathers, with due ceremony too, for when I go there, I must have your company to chant the WORD. Come along. Let us not waste time.'

'If the revered Muni had been here, I would have asked him to strike you,' said Paila. 'Then you would have fallen at his feet and begged his forgiveness.'

'Why don't you do it yourself?' asked Dvaipaayana.

Paila again placed the palms of his hands on his forehead. 'How can I strike you after I have accepted you as my *guru*? But will you tell me where we are going, if not to the Godhuli *ashram*?'

'I have no clear idea where we must go. But the Gods will lead us in their good time. Let us extinguish the sacred fire first,' said Dvaipaayana.

Just as Dvaipaayana and Paila were going to extinguish the sacred fire with due ceremony, five or six naked Rakshasas rushed out of the undergrowth with bamboo poles in their hands, screeching and howling. Before the two realized the danger, one Rakshasa hit Paila on the head, and he, under the impact, fell unconscious; another hit Dvaipaayana on the back. A third began to foul the sacred fire.

As a result of the blow, Dvaipaayana fell to the ground, feeling giddy. He was expecting a finishing blow at any moment, but the blow did not come.

His half-conscious mind registered the sound of conchs and of the scampering feet of the Rakshasas. Then he lost consciousness.

CHAPTER 8

MAHA ATHARVAN JAABAALI

WHEN Dvaipaayana regained consciousness, he had no idea how long he had been unconscious. Evidently the blow which he had anticipated had not fallen. He also heard many voices around him, speaking in the language of the Aryas. Someone was treating his wound, which was very painful.

He opened his eyes. Four or five Twice-borns—for they wore the sacred thread—were trying to revive him. He looked for Paila, but he was not beside him. He made an effort to sit up, but the very exertion was too much for him and he fell back, unconscious.

When he came to his senses again, he opened his eyes wide and tried again to sit up; he could succeed in doing so only when assisted by two people.

One of them was a youth, clad in a deer-skin, of about his own age and pleasant tempered, judging by the expression on his face and his soft, dark brown eyes.

No sooner had Dvaipaayana sat up than the young man shouted : 'Father, this Twice-born has regained consciousness.'

Dvaipaayana looked around and saw the people surrounding him respectfully making way for a strange-looking old man. He was very aged; the hair on his chin and thinning head—too heavy for his small and fragile body—was yellow with age. Though slightly bent with age, he came with rapid strides, barely using his staff.

Dvaipaayana struggled to prostrate himself before the old man, who appeared to be a Muni of a very high order.

The old man, in a low, measured voice, said : 'Don't be foolish,' and waved his hand to order Dvaipaayana to keep seated. He then turned to the young man and asked him : 'Sumantu, how is he ?'

Sumantu, who was applying some leaves to Dvaipaayana's back, turned to the old man : 'He will be all right soon, Father, but he has a bad weal,' he said, pointing to the long contused wound on his back made by the pole which had hit him.

'How do you feel, young man ?' asked the old man, turning to Dvaipaayana. His austere face broke into the semblance of a smile.

'I am well', replied Dvaipaayana, making an effort to smile in spite of the pain he was suffering. Joining his palms, he added : 'Venerable Muni, accept my prostration. You have saved me. But where is Paila, my friend ?'

'Don't worry about him,' said the old man. 'I will presently snatch him from the God of Death'. Then he asked : 'But who are you ?'

Joining his palms in respect, Dvaipaayana replied : 'I am *Srotriya*, a Twice-born devoted to the WORD.'

'What were you doing when the Rakshasas attacked you ?' asked the old man.

'We had just finished the *homa* (worship of the sacred fire) and were on the point of extinguishing the sacred fire.'

'Why did you come to this accursed place ?'

Dvaipaayana's face gave a charming smile. 'How can it be an accursed place if it has been trodden by the sacred feet of the venerable Muni? ' he asked.

The compliment had no effect on the old man. 'Did you invoke the Fire-God properly ?' he asked, looking at the embers of the sacred fire.

'Yes, we did. But we did not know that Rakshasas roamed about in this forest.'

'It was lucky you happened to be here today—the day of the dark, moonless night. Otherwise, we would not have been at this place', said the old man and asked : 'What is your name ?'

'I am called Dvaipaayana,' replied Dvaipaayana.

'What is your friend's name ?'

'His name is Paila.'

'Are both of you Twice-borns ?'

'Yes, Master,' replied Dvaipaayana.

'You were fools to come here', stated the old man sharply.

'My father and I took a pledge that we would restore Dharmakshetra to its old glory. Unfortunately, he died; otherwise he also would have been with us to fulfil the pledge.'

The old man laughed dryly, exposing his toothless mouth. 'Don't you know that this place is accursed, young man ? The spirits of the men who died here in the war still hover over this field.'

By order of the old man, some of his disciples who had already taken their bath, enlarged the *vedi* which Dvaipaayana and Paila had built, and fanned the sacred fire, chanting *mantras*. Dvaipaayana was surprised to see the sacred fire being built on such a large scale.

In the meantime, the old man turned to Dvaipaayana, took a magic charm made of a small piece of wood from Sumantu and tied it on his right arm with *darbha* grass, muttering a *mantra* at the same time.

'Now, get up, Twice-born, and walk,' said the old man sharply. Dvaipaayana was still unable to stand up. 'Come on, get up,' commanded the old man, fixing his penetrating eyes on him.

Dvaipaayana could not take his eyes off the old man and had no will left of his own. He stood up mechanically; all his pain had disappeared.

'Follow me,' ordered the old man.

Dvaipaayana felt as if moving in space and followed the old man mechanically.

The disciples respectfully made way to enable the old man to reach the river. Dvaipaayana followed him, his head lowered, his palms joined. 'Something strange is happening to me,' he said to Sumantu, who only laughed in reply. 'What is the auspicious name of the venerable Muni ?' he asked Sumantu.

'Don't you know ?' asked the young man, surprised. 'He is the *guru* of all *gurus*, Maha Atharvan Jaabaali, the master of life and death.'

Dvaipaayana opened his mouth in surprise. This was the great Master of the Atharvana lore, whose name his father had mentioned on some rare occasions in an awed whisper.

Dvaipaayana had gathered, from a few scattered references his father had made, that he had had to leave Dharmakshetra as a result of a disagreement with his grandfather Vasishtha. There appeared to have been two rival camps of seers : one, inspired by Vasishtha and Viswamitra, held that the WORD was three-fold, *Trayi Vidya—Rik*, *Yajuh* and *Sama*; other claimed the authority of the ancient seers, Bhrigu and Angiras, and insisted that the Atharvana lore was also an integral part of the WORD. His father, though he lived for the three-fold WORD, did not share the view that the Atharvana lore was not a part of it; with the aid of herbs, charms, amulets and sorcery, its *mantras* and practices brought protection to the afflicted, relief to the ailing, love to the love-lorn, victory to kings.

Maha Atharvan, by a gesture, asked Dvaipaayana to follow him. 'I am taking my bath in the lake. Do likewise,' he ordered. Dvaipaayana obeyed the order.

Having performed the appropriate ritual, Maha Atharvan offered libations to the God Surya. Thereafter, he and his disciples chanted the invocation to Varuna, the God of the waters and the skies, who watches over the whole creation.

At the very first words of the *mantras* which the old man chanted, Dvaipaayana felt released from bondage and his rich, melodious voice joined in the chant.

"The mighty Lord, the Great Guardian, knows all,
What is far off and what is near;
Though men long to disguise their acts
The Lord knows what all men do.
Whether a man stands, walks or prowls about,
Or goes slinking away,
Even if he goes into a hiding place,
The Lord is there to see what he does.
If two men sit together to scheme or plot,
Judging they are alone,
The Lord is there as a third, and
He knows all they have contrived.
This earth belongs to the Lord,
And the vast and boundless skies,
Whose boundaries are so far away.
Both seas rest within Him and yet
He is hidden in a drop of water.
If a man should flee beyond the heavens far, far away,
He would not escape the thousand
Eyes of the Lord which watch him.
Whatever exists in heaven and on earth,
Whatever is beyond the skies,
Are unfolded before the eyes of the Lord.
He counts man's ceaseless waverings.
The Lord wields this universe,
As gamester throws his dice.
Thy fateful coils spread out everywhere,
Seven by seven, and three by three.
Ensnare, Lord, whomsoever speaks what is false,
But let him that speaks the truth go free.
Let him be with us to sustain us,
And let us grow to a higher life."

When the invocation was over, Maha Atharvan turned to Dvaipaayana, and for a few moments, looked at him with a frown; his penetrating eyes under his bushy eyebrows tried to gauge the secret of this young ascetic chanting the Atharvana *mantras* with such mastery.

As he came out of the lake, Maha Atharvan turned to Paila who had been placed in the shallow waters of the lake, his head held up by a disciple to let him breathe freely.

He spoke to his son : 'Sumantu, open your bag.' He selected a few herbs when it was held open by Sumantu.

'Bring ashes from the sacred fire,' he said.

Sumantu went to the sacred fire and brought ashes from it.

The old man besmeared Paila's forehead, cheeks, chest and legs with the ashes. He then raised his voice and began to chant an invocation to Yama, the God of Death :

"Yama, Revered God of Death,
United in life, let him enjoy the favours

Of the mighty Surya (the Sun God), the Lord of Light,
Who rules over this immortal world.
Rise up, man. Cast off the shackles of death.
Do not sink down. Do not be cut off from this world.
Nor disappear from the sight of Agni and Surya."

Maha Atharvan paused, applied the ashes to Paila as before and chanted :

"*The Sun and Moon shall guard thee;*
The skies and waters shall guard thee
Against the divine missile;
May the alert and the watchful Gods guard thee,
May He that never sleeps nor nods, guard thee,
May He that protects and is vigilant, guard thee.
Let this man remain with us, ye Gods,
Let him not depart hence to yonder world !
I, Maha Atharvan, by the grace of the sages,
Bhrigu-Angiras,
Rescue him from death with a charm a thousand-fold strong."

Then Maha Atharvan soaked certain herbs in water and squeezed a few drops in between Paila's lips, muttering the *mantra* all the time.

"*The plants jivala, nagha-risha and jivanti,*
Ever victorious, mightily-saving herbs,
You I invoke to let this man be free from danger and death."

Dvaipaayana stood there, in respectful silence, with his palms joined. Quite effortlessly, he memorised the *mantras* which Maha Atharvan chanted, together with their cadences and accents. He realized that these *mantras* were part of the Atharvana lore, which his father had not known.

Maha Atharvan concentrated his gaze on Paila and went on applying the ashes to his body and chanting the *mantras*. In a few moments, Paila's breathing became even.

After the libations had been offered, Maha Atharvan and his disciples and also Dvaipaayana had a repast of fruits and roots.

The sacred fire was extinguished ceremonially, and the disciples, blowing the conchs, two by two, began to leave in procession. Maha Atharvan followed his disciples in a litter.

Paila, who was still unconscious, was carried in a make-shift litter. Dvaipaayana, supported by Sumantu, kept it company:

Again, the spell of Maha Atharvan came over Dvaipaayana. His pain disappeared and he began to follow the old man mechanically.

CHAPTER 9

DVAIPAAYANA ELUDES THE DEATH CHARM

IN THE afternoon, the procession entered a dense forest and arrived at a hill, on the top of which could be seen a settlement of a few hundred huts. It was Maha Atharvan's *ashram*.

They climbed to the *ashram*. In the centre was installed the sacred fire on a huge *vedi*, kept alive day and night.

On arriving, all the disciples, led by Maha Atharvan, took the ashes of the sacred fire and applied them to their foreheads. Then they dispersed.

Sumantu led Dvaipaayana to his own hut, to which two other disciples had already brought the unconscious Paila.

When Dvaipaayana reached the hut, he suddenly felt that he was no longer an automaton, Maha Atharvan had withdrawn the artificial strength that he had given him. He felt utterly exhausted; his forehead was beaded with perspiration; his wound began to give pain. He sank to the floor like a sack.

Sumantu was joined by Vatikaa, dressed in dark cloth. She appeared to be a softer replica of Sumantu, clearly his twin-sister; she was tall for a woman; her movements were free; her black hair was plaited in braids.

She came up to Dvaipaayana and asked him to close his eyes and pray to the twin-gods, the Asvins, the divine physicians, to give him strength. She also gave him the herbal soup which she had brought with her. On taking it, Dvaipaayana felt fire running through his veins though the large contused wound on his back was still smarting.

Vatikaa then turned her attention to Paila, who was still unconscious, placed wet packs on his head, and after forcing open his mouth, poured into it a little of the soup she had given to Dvaipaayana.

Dvaipaayana dozed off; he could not follow the conversation which the brother and sister carried on in a low voice. However, he had a vague impression that Sumantu was telling his sister how they had come to bring the two young ascetics to the *ashram*.

Sumantu and Vatikaa heard the sound of sandals coming towards them and stood up to accost their father with folded hands. The two attendants who were with him stood near the door.

Maha Atharvan's presence charged the atmosphere.

Dvaipaayana woke up, opened his eyes, and seeing the sage, made an effort to sit up. The sage, by a gesture, asked him not to do so.

Maha Atharvan first turned his attention to the unconscious Paila. He applied to Paila's body the ashes which an attendant had brought him from the sacred fire, and in a low voice, chanted the *mantras* to ward off death. Dvaipaayana listened attentively to the *mantras* and checked the accuracy of his memory.

Under the sage's instructions, Vatikaa again poured the herbal soup into Paila's mouth; a faint moan came from the unconscious young man.

By a gesture, Maha Atharvan dismissed the disciple who had brought the ashes. Then he sat down near Dvaipaayana on a wooden plank which an attendant had placed there, holding his staff as straight as if it was a sceptre.

Dvaipaayana, helped by Sumantu, sat up against the wall. Again by a gesture, the old man asked his son and daughter to sit near him. Then, turning his attention to Dvaipaayana, he said: 'Young man, you chanted the Atharvana invocation to the Lord Varuna perfectly.'

Dvaipaayana folded his hands in respect and said: 'Venerable Sir, you do me a great kindness in saying that.'

For a time, the sage concentrated his gaze on Dvaipaayana; as a result, his pain vanished.

'Swear that you will tell me the truth,' said the old man.

'I have always spoken the truth and always will,' replied Dvaipaayana with due modesty. I pledged myself to it when I became a Twice-born and also when I took the oath of the Vasisthas. I have always upheld my vow'.

At the mention of the Vasisthas, the old man made a contemptuous movement of his head. 'Who taught you to chant the Atharvana invocation to the Lord Varuna ?' he asked.

'My father', replied Dvaipaayana.

The old man shot questions at Dvaipaayana as if they were arrows, straight and swift. 'What is your family name ?'

'My family name is Paraashara', replied Dvaipaayana.

'What is your father's name ?' asked Maha Atharvan.

'Muni Paraashara.'

A flame of hatred sprang up in the old sage's eyes; his voice became as sharp as a razor. 'Whose son was your father ?'

Dvaipaayana could see that the old man's attitude towards him had changed for the worse. 'He was the son of Muni Shakti, the son of Maha Muni Vasistha.'

'How did your father come to know the *mantras* of *Brahma Vidya* so perfectly ?' asked the old man.

'I don't know how, but he taught me several *mantras* of the Atharvana lore.'

'From whom did he learn the Atharvana *mantras* ?' asked the old sage.

'He did not tell me from whom he learned them. He only told me that they formed the fourth part of the WORD,' replied Dvaipaayana.

'Did he say in whose keeping the *Brahma Vidya* was ?'

'Once or twice, I remember, he referred to you as the venerable Maha Atharvan who was the master of life and death and I am grateful to the Gods for having brought me to you'.

The old man's face was inscrutable. 'Do you know that Vasistha, your great-grandfather, was an enemy of the *Brahma Vidya*[1], the highest form of the WORD ?' he asked.

'No,' replied Dvaipaayana.

'...that he claimed that the WORD was only three-fold—*Rik*, *Yajuh* and *Sama* ?' The questions were savagely-dealt sword-thrusts.

'No,' replied Dvaipaayana.

'...that he denied the Atharvans their primacy at the sacrificial sessions ?'

'No.'

'...that I laid my curse on Dharmakshetra and because of it the Haihayas destroyed it and killed Vasistha ?'

'No.'

'...that your father stealthily learnt many Atharvana *mantras* from my son ?' asked the old man.

'No.'

'...that when Vasistha came to know it, he ordered your father not to chant them, and thereupon your father left Dharmakshetra ?'

'No.'

Dvaipaayana now understood why his father, in the prime of his life, had left the parental *ashram* and founded an *ashram* on the banks of the river Yamuna.

'Where did he go ?' asked the old man.

'My father founded an *ashram* on the banks of Mother Yamuna,' replied Dvaipaayana.

'Tell me of your father's *ashram*.'

'It was a flourishing *ashram*,' replied Dvaipaayana. 'Then the wicked King, Sahasrarjuna, came and reduced it to ashes and killed most of the disciples.'

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[1] Vide Note appended to this chapter.

'My curse followed your father. Did he escape Sahasrarjuna ?'

'Yes. When the *ashram* was burnt down and his disciples were massacred, he had been to the Arya Kings to combine them against Sahasrarjuna. When he returned to his *ashram*, Arjuna's men broke his leg.'

'When did he die ?'

'A few months ago,' replied Dvaipaayana.

'Why have you come here ?'

'My father and I pledged ourselves to restore Dharmakshetra to its original grandeur.'

'Why ?' asked the old man, his displeasure mounting.

'...to provide the authoritative source from which *dharma* can flow unsullied. Without restoring Dharmakshetra, *dharma* will disappear,' replied Dvaipaayana.

'It will never be restored. My curse is on it.'

A charming smile was on Dvaipaayana's face. 'Your curse destroyed it. Now your blessing will restore it.'

'No. I will never give that.'

'But the Gods will persuade you, Master, to do so.'

'Why do you say that ?' asked the old man.

'Because you saved me and Paila from the Rakshasas. It was a sign from the Gods', said Dvaipaayana firmly.

The old sage's eyes lighted up like live coals. His voice, though low, was threatening. 'Dharmakshetra will not be restored. The ancient seers, Bhrigu and Angiras, have so decided.'

'Master, all the ancient seers would be happy if Dharmakshetra was restored,' said Dvaipaayana with unshaken faith.

'You are mad, young man', said the old man and added : 'Why are you so eager to restore Dharmakshetra ?'

'How can *dharma* uphold life, if it is not supported by men who, dedicated to the WORD, live in and for it ? The world is waiting for them.'

'You talk as if the ancient seers had blessed the venture,' said the old man.

'Master, "the Gods grant the prayers of those who dedicate themselves to the WORD as the source of righteous living," as the venerable Muni Paraashara said' answered Dvaipaayana.

'Your great-grandfather offended the *Brahma Vidya* and the ancient seers, Bhrigu and Angiras. They will never forgive him and those who follow him,' said the old sage.

'Venerable Sir, let me be your disciple. I had already decided that once I settled down in Dharmakshetra, I would be a disciple of a master of the Atharvana lore. The Gods have now brought me to you,' said Dvaipaayana.

'I will accept you as my disciple and teach you the *Brahma Vidya* only if you give up this foolish idea of restoring Dharmakshetra,' said the old man.

'How can I go back upon the pledge which my venerable father took and in which I also joined ?' asked Dvaipaayana.

The old man stood up in stern displeasure. 'I warn you : if you persist in your so-called mission, you will come to grief.'

'Master, if I cannot keep my oath, I will be dead spiritually, unable to face my forefathers or the Gods.'

Vatikaa knew her father's moods and by her look, tried to warn Dvaipaayana not to annoy him.

Maha Atharvan had eyes all round his head and he said : 'Even if Vatikaa and Sumantu warn you not to make me angry, ...' He then laughed. 'These children think that I can deviate from my life's work because of your innocent looks and disarming speech.'

Then, with a stern look, he added: 'The wrath of the divine sages, Bhrigu and Angiras, is ever active and ever devastating.'

Saying this, Maha Atharvan accepted Sumantu's help and left the hut.

Vatikaa and Sumantu came back to where Dvaipaayana was sitting, his head in his hands. He felt crushed. He wanted to cry, but something in him lifted him out of despair.

They brought with them a magic herb and applied it to his wound. Vatikaa also gave him the herbal soup and left the hut. Sumantu gave some water to the unconscious Paila and stretched himself on a bed of fresh leaves near Dvaipaayana.

Dvaipaayana dozed off for a while and sat up when he heard the cherished voice of his mother: 'Krishna, where are you? Why don't you come?'

He rubbed his eyes. Paila lay unconscious, though off and on a low moan escaped him. Sumantu was asleep.

In the fitful light which came through the door from the sacred fire, kept blazing the whole night, Dvaipaayana saw a figure entering the hut. He guessed that Sumantu's sister had come to see her brother.

Sumantu woke when Vatikaa placed her hand on him. The brother and the sister then had a whispered conversation for some time and came up to Dvaipaayana's bed.

'Dvaipaayana, are you awake?'

Dvaipaayana sat up and rubbed his eyes to make sure that he was not dreaming.

Vatikaa said: 'Dvaipaayana, do you know what will happen to you tomorrow?'

'How can I know that?' asked Dvaipaayana.

'Father is going to put the death spell on you tomorrow after Agni, the Fire God, has been worshipped.'

'What is the death spell? I do not know what that means.'

'It is a charm which will kill you in three days,' said Sumantu.

'Why should he kill me?' asked Dvaipaayana.

Vatikaa intervened: 'Don't spend your time talking. In my presence, he gave instructions to prepare the charm which will bring you death within three days, wherever you are.'

'Why should he kill me?' asked Dvaipaayana. 'I have done no harm.'

'Yesterday he found you a determined young man with vast learning and self-confidence,' whispered Vatikaa. 'He consulted the planets and decided to do away with you. But let us not waste time. Get up and go. Take this herbal soup which I have prepared for you. Here is the bag of herbs which your friend Paila was carrying. I have also put in your bag the three saviour plants—*jivala*, *nagha-risha* and *jivanti*, though, without the appropriate *mantras*, they will have no efficacy,' said Vatikaa.

Dvaipaayana smiled. 'I know the *mantras*. I memorized them when Maha Atharvan chanted over Paila, once on the bank of the river and the next time here.'

Vatikaa opened her eyes wide in admiration. 'You are wonderful,' she said, unable to restrain herself, 'I wish I had your memory.'

'But how can I go out at night? I don't know the way. And what about my friend?' asked Dvaipaayana.

'He will remain unconscious for several weeks, but Father says he will recover. We will look after him. Now come along. We will take you to the foot of the hill. We can easily find our way by the star-light. Hurry up,' said Vatikaa.

They put on wooden sandals, fastened them to their feet with strips of leather, stealthily went out by the rear door and took to the trail.

When they came to the foot of the hill, Dvaipaayana bade them good-bye. He turned to Sumantu. '*Gurus* adopt disciples. In my case, I have adopted Maha Atharvan as my *guru*. So we are brothers. Let me embrace you', he said and enveloped Sumantu in his arms with affection.

He also took leave of Vatikaa by folding his hands. 'I will never forget your kindness. I will be back soon and, blessed by your father, we will restore Dharmakshetra.'

Saying this, Dvaipaayana took to the forest path.

NOTE ON THE ATHARVANA LORE

The *Srauta* literature, like other authorities, shows that at one time there was a rift between the school of seers who held that the Vedas were *Trayi Vidya*, three-fold—*Rik*, *Yajuh* and *Sama*, and the Atharvana school which invoked the authority of the ancient seers, *Atharvan Angiras* or *Bhrigu Angiras*, and which insisted that the Atharvana lore was part of the Vedas.

The dominating content of the Atharvana Veda includes *Yatu Vidya* (sorcery), medicines (*beshajani*), statecraft(*raja-karmani*), and *mantras* to secure protection against curses or hostile plots.

When the *Trayi Vidya* school dominated , it seems, the Atharvan priests were denied a place among the four leading ritualists at the *Srauta* sacrifical ceremonials. Later, the position appears to have changed. By slow degrees, the Atharvana lore found a place as an integral part of the Veda, the Atharvans claiming it as *Brahma - Vidya* or the Supreme WORD. The office of Brahma, the fourth priest at the *Srauta* ceremonials, had to be filled by an Atharvan, enjoying the power to correct, by means of expiatory formulas, the accidents and blunders of the three others—*adhvaryu*, *hota* and *udgata*. *Adhvaryu* presides over the ceremonials as the head of the ritualists; *Hota* chants the appropriate *mantras*: *Udgata* sings them.

Later it appears that it was accepted that the royal preceptor, the *Purohit*, should be an Atharvan, for he had to deal with statecraft, medical relief and astrology.

CHAPTER 10

EMPRESS MEETS DVAIPAAYANA

DVAIPAAYANA was happy when he arrived at Hastinapur. In all his plans for resurrecting Dharmakshetra, the capital of the Kurus occupied a central place.

The 56-year-old Shantanu, Emperor of Hastinapur, had led the Kurus in war and peace. Coming to the throne when he was barely twenty, he had participated in the bitter and relentless war which the Aryas had waged for years to destroy the Haihaya hordes.

Wise, vigorous and strong, he had extended his influence over Aryavarta, though it was a hard task welding his turbulent subjects into a comparatively peaceful society.

By his impressive achievements during the thirty-five years of his rule, he had earned the imperial status of a *Chakravarti*, which had been enjoyed by his forefather Bharat.

In the chaos created by the war, the Aryas, the Nagas and other races had forgotten their differences and fought and won side by side. Inter-marriages followed. The Aryan pantheon was enlarged to make room for some non-Aryan gods.

During the war, the old homes of learning had all but vanished. Dharmakshetra, where the *rishis*, by precept and example, had lighted the way of righteous living to hundreds of disciples, was now a painful memory. The sacred fire installed by the Aryas in every home had lost its paramount significance. The sacrificial session elaborately conducted, sometimes lasting for years, in which hundreds of *Srotriyas* participated, so that it was something in the nature of a university, had now been temporarily brought back into existence, to add to the luxury of kings.

Shantanu's lavish generosity had helped the ascetics, men of learning and *Srotriyas* to pursue their avocation in the land over which he held sway. However, there was a medley of cultures among them. Some followed the tradition of the ancient seers; others had come to worship Shiva, the dread god who was also generous with his gifts; some others claimed divine powers which carried no moral and spiritual discipline with them.

No central authority had been set up to co-ordinate their activities or impose a common discipline over them. The firm axis round which most of them revolved however was purely the common belief in the divinity of the WORD, which the *Srotriyas* were expected to learn, teach and propagate.

On arriving at Hastinapur, Dvaipaayana went straight the to temple of the God of gods, Pratipeshwar, which, begun by Pratip, was completed by Shantanu, his son. In company with his father, he had halted there when they had gone on a pilgrimage to Badri Ashram.

When Dvaipaayana entered the temple, he made enquiries whether there was some place where he could rest for a while. He was politely taken to a mongo-grove set apart in the temple grounds for visiting ascetics, men of learning and *Srotriyas*.

The first thing which he did on arrival was to take a bathe in the Gangaa and perform the essential ritual for noon. When he came back to the grove, he found that the time for providing meals for visitors had gone. He decided to go hungry rather than approach a devout householder for food.

Dvaipaayana for the moment felt disheartened. He had come to Hastinapur at an inopportune moment. The Emperor lay dying. Nobody was in a mood to discuss the restoration of Dharmakshetra.

He knew nothing of the complicated procedure for securing an audience with such a powerful ruler as Shantanu. He therefore joined the group of visiting guests who were being taken to the royal mansion by the young Minister Kunik to give their blessings to the dying Emperor.

Dvaipaayana was all too conscious that the deer-skin he wore was worn and dirty; and that having walked for days together, he was tired; his wan face showed that he had had no full meal for days.

Naturally the Minister was not impressed. 'Where do you come from, venerable Sir?' asked Kunik. There was an undercurrent of suspicion in his voice.

'I have come from Dharmakshetra,' replied Dvaipaayana.

'Dharmakshetra!' exclaimed Kunik. 'That Field of Wolves? How did you leave it alive?'

Dvaipaayana noted the insinuation in the Minister's words but ignored it. 'Yes, I have come from Dharmakshetra. The Gods spared me.'

'What is your *gotra* (clan name)?' asked Kunik.

'Paraashara *gotra*,' replied Dvaipaayana.

Kunik felt that this young ascetic was deceiving him. He asked: 'Do you know where Muni Paraashara, the grandson of Mahamuni Vasistha, is?'

'He went to the Land of the Forefathers.'

'Where did the venerable Muni die?'

'He was killed by wolves when he was on a visit to the Field of Ashes, the place where originally his *ashram* stood, which was burnt down by Sahasrarjuna,' replied Dvaipaayana.

'How do you know that?' asked Kunik.

'I was there myself,' replied Dvaipaayana.

Kunik's doubts were not resolved, but he did not want to keep the other visitors waiting. So, by a gesture, he invited Dvaipaayana to join them.

The group of visitors, guided by the Minister, was taken to the room where the Emperor lay dying. In front of the room, a special sacrificial session was being conducted by the royal priests to ward off death.

The room was airy and spacious. The royal preceptor sat in a corner, muttering prayers. A few *Srotriyas* sat at a distance, invoking the Asvins, the twin Gods of the healing art.

Yuvaraj Gangeya, looking stern, stood near the bed, and cast anxious glances at the unconscious Emperor. On the other side,near the head of the bed, sat the Empress Satyavati, her face covered by a gold-embroidered scarf to conceal the tears which were running down her cheeks, her sons Chitrangada and Vichitraveerya by her side.

Near her, stood two foreign girls, fair and beautiful, unabashedly scarfless, moving their fly-whisks mechanically over the dying Emperor.

Prince Gangeya folded his hands, and by a gesture, invited the guests to approach the bed. Dvaipaayana modestly placed himself in the rear. The visitors uttered a short *mantra*, extended their hands and blessed the Emperor.

No sooner was the *mantra* finished, Prince Gangeya folded his hands to the guests, and by a gesture, invited them to leave the bed-room. All of them left, except Dvaipaayana, who stood waiting for the Prince.

Prince Gangeya was disgusted at the way the visitors came in an unending stream to Hastinapur from all parts of Aryavarta to bless the Emperor and left him no better. He was, therefore, irritated at this young ascetic with the shabby deer-skin and hungry look not leaving the room with the others.

'May I have your permission to approach the Emperor's bed?' asked Dvaipaayana.

Impatience got the better of Prince Gangeya's manners. Curtly he said: 'No, venerable Sir. Please leave now.'

The words were courteous enough, but the manner in which they were spoken was insulting.

Even the good-natured, broad smile of Dvaipaayana, which always succeeded in disarming anger in others, failed to make an impression on Prince Gangeya, who again asked: 'What do you want?'

Dvaipaayana raised his head in dignity and said: 'Noble Prince, I have come to give, not to take.'

Gangeya turned his back upon Dvaipaayana, whom he thought was impertinent.

Dvaipaayana blessed the Emperor from a distance and left with a heavy heart. The whole purpose of his visit to Hastinapur was frustrated. His hope of restoring Dharmakshetra with the help of the Emperor Shantanu, on which he had built so far, vanished. The Prince did not appear to be a helpful person. His self-confidence was shaken. He wished his father were alive to show him the way out of the darkness which for the moment surrounded him.

As he was leaving the grounds of the mansion, an elderly woman—from her dress, a highly placed attendant of the royal mansion—came towards him with hurried steps. After saluting Dvaipaayana, she said: 'Venerable Sir, evidently you have come from a long distance. Have you had any food?'

'No', replied Dvaipaayana. 'I came to the temple after the food had been distributed to the other guests.'

'My mistress, the noble Mahadevi, would like you to come with me and take your food in the mansion' said the attendant. 'She saw you were tired and was unhappy that you were turned away by Prince Gangeya. She wants me to request you to forgive the Prince; he is undergoing a heavy strain on account of the Emperor's illness.'

Dvaipaayana said with dignity: 'After the way I was turned out, I know that I have no place in Hastinapur. Tell the noble Mahadevi that it is not difficult for me to go without food.'

'The noble Mahadevi, under a vow, does not allow any *Srotriya* to leave the mansion without taking food,' said the attendant and added: 'She would also like to meet you.'

'Why?' asked Dvaipaayana.

'The noble Mahadevi was struck by the words you uttered: "I have come to give, not to take." She felt that it was not an idle boast. You could help the Best of Bharatas to rocover from his illness,' said the attendant.

'I would not like to force myself on the royal family,' said Dvaipaayana.

'Please come with me,' besought the attendant. The noble Mahadevi will never forgive me if I do not bring you to her.'

Dvaipaayana thought for a little while. 'Very well. I do not want you to be blamed for my not coming,' he said and followed the attendant to the rear of the royal mansion, where he was ushered by her into a big room.

At one end, he saw the Empress, a small woman, but graceful, sitting in front of a small shrine of the God of gods; her head and face were covered by her scarf.

Dvaipaayana stood at a respectful distance from the Empress.

The Empress saw the ascetic, stood up and took a step to approach him with folded hands. He was also ready to extend his right hand in blessing....

The scarf slipped off her face and head....

Seeing her face, Davipaayana's eyes opened wide in amazement; the staff and the gourd fell from his hands.

There was no mistaking the graceful figure, the bright luminous eyes, the small feet, the glowing face which the years had not robbed of its beauty.

The Empress was taken aback at the behaviour of the young ascetic, who, reversing the normal observances, had fallen at her feet.

However, no sooner had Dvaipaayana stood up than she recognized the homely face, the winning smile, the eyes beaming with kindliness. Ignoring the presence of the attendants, she flung all decorum to the winds and exclaimed: 'Krishna!'

Dvaipaayana equally overcome by emotion, almost sobbed with joy.

The attendants, sensing the poignancy of the situation, withdrew from the room.

'Krishna, where is your venerable father?' asked the Empress.

'He died four months ago; he was killed by wolves when we were on a visit to the Field of Ashes,' replied Dvaipaayana.

'Did you complete your period of *Brahmacharya* under him?' asked the Empress.

'Yes, Mother,' replied Dvaipaayana.

'Are you alone?'

'Mother, you know Paila, don't you? He was with me, but he was seriously injured and is now lying in an *ashram*,' said Dvaipaayana and asked: 'Did you recongnize me after so many years?'

'I always see your face vividly. How can I forget your eyes and smile, which I have never known in any other man?' said the Empress. 'Did you ever think of me?'

'Mother, how could I ever forget you? After Father went to the Land of the Forefathers, I even went to Kalpi to meet you.'

'What of the people at Kalpi?' asked the Empress.

'I met the village-folk, who told me that you had gone away with a king—they did not know where to, and that Grandfather and Grandmother also went away with some people.'

'Oh, I am forgetting that you have not taken your food,' said the Empress. She clapped her hands and called her attendants. When they came, she asked them to bring food for Dvaipaayana.

Dvaipaayana took the food brought to him by the attendants. The Empress sat in front of him on a *pat* (low stool) encrusted with gold and silver.

Mother and son had parted thirteen years ago under tragic circumstances. By a strange turn of fortune, however, they had been brought together—one as an ascetic dedicated to *Dharma*, and the other as an Empress.

'Do you remember your promise that you would come to me whenever I wanted you?' asked the Empress. 'I have been calling you every day.'

'Yes. How can I ever forget you? You are always present before me. I also heard your voice, once in the Field of Wolves and again in the *ashram* of Maha Atharvan, saying: "Krishna, where are you? Why don't you come?" and the Gods guided my feet to you,' said Dvaipaayana smilingly and continued: 'When I went to Kalpi, I also set afloat a pot containing a *peepul* leaf to beg you to forgive me.'

'For what?' asked the Empress.

'You were angry with me for having left you at Kalpi.'

'How could I ever be angry with you?' asked the Empress happily. 'You could never have made me angry.'

In the meantime, an attendant, in accordance with the Empress's direction, brought the two princes, Chitrangada and Vichitraveerya, one aged eleven and the other ten, both thin and pale-faced, arrogant as over-fondled children generally are when their slighest wish is anticipated by their parents.

They folded their hands before their mother, but could not conceal their disapproval at her sitting so close to the shabbily-dressed ascetic in disregard of her imperial dignity.

Satyavati, the Empress, turned to them and said affectionately: 'My sons, this is Krishna Dvaipaayana, son of the great Muni Paraashara. It was on account of the Sage's blessing that I came to wed the noble Aryaputra, your father. Dvaipaayana is young, but he has inherited the learning and *tapas* of his revered father. Fall at his feet and ask for his blessing.'

Both the boys bowed before Dvaipaayana perfunctorily, joining their palms.

Chitrangada turned to his mother and said : 'Is he not the same ascetic who wanted to see Father and whom Brother Gangeya turned out?'

Ignoring the offensive remark, Dvaipaayana smiled indulgently at both the princes and gave them blessings.

'What does he want of you, Mother?' asked Vichitraveerya.

Dvaipaayana, who saw annoyance on the face of the Empress, intervened: 'Prince,I want nothing from the noble Empress or from anyone else. As I told Prince Gangeya, I came here to give, not to take.'

'What can you give us?' asked Chitrangada haughtily.

'I can get you the help of the Gods—from the ever-living WORD', replied Dvaipaayana.

The Empress asked her sons to take leave of the young ascetic, which they did half-heartedly.

When they were gone and the attendants withdrew, the Empress turned to Dvaipaayana and said: 'Krishna, I am in great difficulty. I want Aryaputra to recover; the future of my sons depends upon it.'

She was no longer the Empress, but the fisher-girl narrating her woes to her son. 'When the noble Aryaputra wanted to marry me, your grandfather insisted that Prince Gangeya should take a pledge that he would neither claim the throne nor marry. Before Aryaputra fell ill, I had been pressing on him the need of announcing before the Rajya Sabha that Chitrangada should succeed Aryaputra and that Prince Gangeya should keep his promise.

'Are you afraid, Mother—I mean noble Empress—that Prince Gangeya, will not keep his pledge if it is not announced before the Rajya Sabha ?' asked Dvaipaayana.

'I know Gangeya will. He is honest, truth-loving and straightforward; he treats me with the honour due to a mother. I have no doubt that he will keep the promise he has given to his father. In fact he has rejected more than one offer of marriage. He is also doing his best to train both my sons in statecraft,' said the Empress.

'Where is the difficulty then ?' asked Dvaipaayana.

The Empress replied : 'The Kuru chiefs are very proud, and if Aryaputra proceeds to the Land of the Forefathers without Gangeya's pledge being confirmed by the Rajya Sabha, there is sure to be a conflict among them and the party favouring Gangeya is very powerful. If your father had been alive, I would have begged of him to restore Aryaputra to consciousness by his *mantra-vidya*. Somehow I felt that you, as his son, might have acquired his *mantra-vidya*.

'I am not sure whether I have,' replied Dvaipaayana modestly. Then he added : 'If the Gods want me to fulfil my mission, they will help me to restore the health of the Emperor.'

'I will call Prince Gangeya to take you to the noble Aryaputra', said the Empress.

When Gangeya came, she told him that the ascetic, Dvaipaayana, was the son of the great Muni Paraashara, who lived for the WORD and could work miracles.

In her sweet way she added : 'I called him back because I could see that he had had no food. Now why not let Dvaipaayana try to restore the noble Aryaputra to health by his *mantra-vidya* ? After all nothing is to be lost.'

Prince Gangeya, though he knew very well that no art of healing could prolong his father's life, complied with her request, as he did not want his step-mother to feel that her wishes were not carried out.

An attendant was asked by the Empress to take Dvaipaayana down the steps leading to the river Gangaa. He purified himself by a bath, offered worship to the Sun God, and by chanting the sacred *mantra*, *Gayatri*, invoked his assistance.

Though outwardly calm and self-possessed, Dvaipaayana was intensely moved by the miraculous events that were happening : the death of his father; his escape from the wolves and from the Rakshasas; the way he came to learn the *mantras* for reviving the dead from Maha Atharvan Jaabaali; his escape from the *ashram* of Maha Atharvan; the strange manner in which he was led to his mother; his opportunity to cure the Emperor; all of them culminating in the possibility of restoring Dharmakshetra with the aid of Hastinapur. He was overwhelmed by the blessings showered upon him by the Gods.

When he was being taken to the room in which the Emperor lay, Dvaipaayana silently invoked the help of his forbears—Paraashara, Shakti, Vasistha; even of Bhrigu and Angiras, the seers, whose heir was Maha Atharvan whom he had accepted as his *guru*; also the God Surya, the Lord of light; above all, the WORD to which his life had been dedicated.

He looked at his mother. Her face was full of hope. If he failed —'Oh, Gods,' he muttered, 'her heart will be broken; her smile will vanish for ever.' He dared not fail, he felt; no, he would not. Dharmakshetra had to be re-established; the Gods had so willed.

With self-confidence, he stepped into the room, behind Prince Gangeya, and followed by the Empress and the attendants.

The old *Srotriyas* in the room were shocked at the intrusion of this young upstart into what was their monopoly. How could this youngster succeed where they, with years of austerity had failed?

Acharya Vibhuti, the royal preceptor, who sat on a deer-skin, near the Emperor's bed, wore a chain of gold, rings on his fingers and a silken scarf—the insignia of his office. An expert in *mantra-*

vidya himself, he could not help looking contemptuously at the young ascetic who claimed to perform miracles.

Dvaipaayana, with the materials brought by the attendants, prepared a small *vedi* near the Emperor's bed. He lighted the sacred fire, and made an offering to Agni, the Fire-God.

He took the ashes from the sacred fire and applied them to the Emperor's forehead, cheeks, chest and feet as he had seen Maha Atharvan doing to Paila.

He began to chant the appropriate *mantras*, first from the three-fold WORD and later from those which Maha Atharvan had recited to revive Paila. Soon his melodious voice filled the air.

He invoked the God of Death, took the magic herbs from his bag, mixed them with water and poured the mixture between the lips of the Emperor.

As he went on chanting the *mantras* his voice charged with intense faith, the atmosphere was transformed. The sunshine gained a new refreshing warmth.

Again he took the ashes from the sacred fire and applied them to the Emperor and began to chant. Everyone stood transfixed, as his voice filled the air and his eyes, fixed on the unconscious Emperor gained an intensity as if flames were about to leap out of them any moment.

The Empress saw this intensity in her son's eyes and was reminded of the days when, at Kalpi, he used to stand on the bank of the river and call upon his father to come—an invitation delivered with a passionate earnestness capable a bringing his father from wherever he was.

All eyes were rivetted on him as his whole body became taut as if he was gathering all his vitality and channelling it through his voice. Every one felt his eyes were blazing with light, throwing out rays of power, penetrating the body of the Emperor.

The chant went on and on..All the people in the room waited breathlessly for a miracle...

The chant went on and on .. The Emperor's eyes began to flutter. His breath became even. He appeared to have lapsed into a deep sleep.

The next time when the mixture of the magic herbs was poured into his mouth, the Emperor opened his eyes a little, looked at Prince Gangeya. . . closed them again.

He again opened his eyes and fastened them on the Empress in a glow of recognition for a moment, closed them and then fell asleep.

When the chanting was over for the day, Dvaipaayana ceremonially extinguished the sacred fire, took his staff and gourd, and blessing the Empress, Prince Gangeya and the Princes with a silent gesture, left the room. The people who had heard about the miracle and gathered outside the mansion, looked at the young ascetic with amazement and reverence.

The young ascetic, himself drained of all vitality, and awe-struck at the miracle which had happened, with head bowed and humility in his heart, oblivious of the crowd, took the way to the temple ground.

CHAPTER 11

GANGEYA'S VOWS

ON THE eighth day of the treatment, the Emperor Shantanu was able to sit up, take interest in what was happening and talk, though in a feeble voice.

In the afternoon, after the treatment for the day was over, Dvaipaayana extinguished the sacred fire ceremonially and got ready to leave for the temple.

The Emperor lay on his bed of soft bear-skins; on the bed, to his left, sat the Empress Satyavati, rubbing his arm slowly, her face beaming with happiness at her husband's recovery and pride at what her son had achieved.

Near the head of the bed stood two whisk-bearers, performing their duties mechanically.

On the right side of the patient's bed sat Prince Gangeya, his face no longer ridden with anxiety, looking at Dvaipaayana with respect. He could never understand how his father had been revived after all remedies had failed, and with his clarity of perception, saw that the young ascetic had an immense destiny before him.

Acharya Vibhuti, the old *purohit*, the royal preceptor, sat next to him, eyeing Dvaipaayana with distrust. He was shaken by the miracle that had been wrought. He knew most of the *mantras* which the young ascetic had chanted; he himself had a vast experience of the *mantra-vidya*, but he had failed to do what the young stranger had done.

He enjoyed a vast prestige as the leading *Srotriya* and was known for his uncompromising hostility towards those who held that the Atharvana lore was part of the WORD. His presence by the bed-side of the ailing Emperor was part of his official duty; otherwise he would have left the moment Dvaipaayana's treatment included the chanting of *mantras* from the Atharvana lore and using the magic saving herbs approved by it.

The young Minister, Kunik, a very shrewd and ambitious man, stood near the foot of the bed, calculating what influence Dvaipaayana was likely to have over Hastinapur and how best he could derive the maximum benefit from it.

Before leaving the room, Dvaipaayana whispered to Prince Gangeya to have the room cleared of the attendants. By a gesture, Gangeya asked Kunik and the attendants to withdraw from the room.

After the room was cleared, Dvaipaayana said to the Emperor :

'Best of Bharatas, the treatment will end tomorrow, the ninth day. Then you will be able to walk a little and my services will no longer be required.'

Shantanu silently folded his hands in salutation and asked : 'How may I reward you, venerable Dvaipaayana ?' His eyes were full of gratitude.

'A reward !' exclaimed Dvaipaayana with a boyish laugh. 'I would not know what to do with it, noble Emperor.' He added : 'If I accepted it, my *tapas* would lose its efficacy and in my mouth the *mantras* would lose their power. I have done nothing to deserve any reward. The Lord of Light guided my footsteps to Hastinapur and gave me power to cure you, as he does to many many *Srotriyas*.

As a sign from his father, Prince Gangeya bent down and listened to what he wanted to tell him. Then he turned to Dvaipaayana and said : 'Father wants to know how he can help you in what you seek.'

'Best of Bharatas,' replied Dvaipaayana, 'you have laid me under a deep obligation. You have given me the confidence that the God Surya, the Lord of Light, is with me in what I seek. I have only one aim in life : to revive the *dharma* of our forefathers.'

'Throughout his life, Father has helped *dharma* to his utmost,' said Gangeya.

The Emperor's lips twitched into the semblance of a smile. He made a gesture to indicate that he wanted to speak. Then, in a low voice, he said : 'Yet *dharma* is declining.'

'Noble Emperor, it is no one's fault. Sahasrarjuna was like an all-consuming wild fire. He destroyed everything that came in his way', said Dvaipaayana deliberately and as if charging every word with significance. 'In resisting him, the Aryas had to fight for their very life; this you, noble Emperor, who took a leading part in the war, know better than any one. Most of the *ashrams* were destroyed. Homes were unsettled. Women, uprooted and unprotected, courted death or became the victims of lust. Righteous men retired into obscurity. The ancient ordinances governing the life of the Aryas were forgotten.'

'What is the way out ?' asked the Emperor. His eyes showed that he was deeply interested in what Dvaipaayana was saying.

'Noble Emperor, the only way to save *dharma*—why, life itself —is for *Kshatra-tej*, radiant valour, to be irrevocably allied with *Brahma-tej*, radiant righteousness, as it was before the war,' said Dvaipaayana.

Gangeya nodded his head to express his agreement. 'That is so, venerable Dvaipaayana,' he said. 'But what can we do to bring it about ?'

'My father, Muni Paraashara, often said that *dharma* would never flourish if the *Srotriyas* failed to lead an austere life and the Kshatriyas failed to profess righteous living,' said Dvaipaayana.

'What you say is perfectly true, venerable Dvaipaayana,' said Gangeya, shaking his head. 'The days of royal sages like Manu and Vivasvan are gone. The Kshatriyas do not understand the value of *tapas*, much less live for it. They struggle for power. They waste their life in revelry. They kill each other. They laugh at *dharma*.'

Gangeya put his hand of his father's arm affectionately and continued : 'Father himself is puzzled. The Kshatriyas have lost the art of righteous living. The rot has set in. I cannot see how it can be halted.'

Dvaipaayana smiled indulgently. 'It is in the hands of the noble Emperor and in your hands, noble Gangeya, to halt the rot.'

'I wish it was,' said Gangeya with a sigh. 'Sometimes I myself find it diffcult to live according to *dharma*.'

'Noble Prince, do not despair,' said Dvaipaayana with a wisdom far beyond his years. 'Light is always born out of darkness; only when *dharma* is rampant does *dharma* gather strength.'

'Let me know what we can perform. Father will, I am sure, do his utmost,' said Gangeya. In spite of the difference in age, he felt humble before this young ascetic.

'The way is simple. When you, I and hundreds of others were inducted into *Brahmacharya*, we took the vows :

> " I will remember good and forget evil.
> I will practise faith and shun disbelief.
> I will honour knowledge and shun ignorance.
> I will follow truth and shun falsehood.
> I shall lead an austere life and shun luxury."

'If we keep to these vows, the Lord of Light will show us the way,' said Dvaipaayana.

His eyes, for a moment, were clouded. He added modestly: 'Don't think that I have been able to keep to my vows as strictly as I could wish; only I have not given up the effort.'

He paused for a moment, silently gazed at the mellow sunshine which flooded the room through the windows and the doors and recited the *Gayatri* to himself, seeking the guidance of his guardian god, the God Surya.

Then he added : 'In spite of failures, my faith has never wavered; the pledge which my father, the venerable Muni Paraashara, took cannot remain unredeemed.' With these words, he recaptured his self-confidence.

When Muni Paraashara's name was mentioned, the Empress blushed. Continuing to rub her husband's arm, she asked in a quiet, melodious voice: 'What was the exact pledge which the venerable Muni took ?' Then turning to the Emperor, she said : 'The noble Aryaputra already knows that it was the blessing of Muni Paraashara which brought me the happiness of being his spouse.'

Dvaipaayana was no longer hesitant. He spoke firmly, decisively : 'My father pledged that he would restore Dharmakshetra as the source of living by *dharma*. I am only seeking its fulfilment.'

'The Field of Wolves is a jungle infested by wild beasts,' said Gangeya.

Dvaipaayana smiled and asked : 'Well do I know it, noble Prince. In company with my friend, Paila, I spent a night there before I started for Hastinapur. Wolves, bears and other wild beasts live there; so do the Rakshasas. We would have been killed by the Rakshasas if the God Surya, the Lord of Light, had not sent a venerable Muni to our rescue.'

'It is easy to destory the beasts and clear the forest, but the place is accursed; the ghosts of countless warriors who died there, roam across it; men cannot live in such a spot', said Gangeya.

'I am going to live there,' said Dvaipaayana with a smile. 'An *ashram* will flourish wherever the *Srotriyas* observe the vows that they have taken.' After a pause, he continued : 'Noble Gangeya, *dharma* cannot be revived unless the *Brahma-tej* and *Kshatra-tej* are wedded; if they are not, the righteous will have to retire to caves and the unrighteous will sink into beasts.'

'Remember, Father has done his best to revive *kshatra-tej*, the radiance of valour,' said Gangeya with a sad smile. 'But I fear he found no true response in others.'

'It is our fault, noble Prince—the fault of all of us who believe in *dharma*', said Dvaipaayana. 'Only when we live up to the vows we have taken, even at the cost of our lives, will the hearts of men be stirred, not otherwise.'

Gangeya was lost in thought. He felt that the young ascetic was unintentionally administering a rebuke to him.

As if he had read Gangeya's mind, Dvaipaayana smiled in a friendly way. 'Noble Gangeya, in you both the *tejas* live together. The noble Empress was full of praise for you, and for the way in which you keep your vows.'

The Emperor, casting an affectionate glance at Gangeya, said in a low voice. 'Gangeya never deviates from the path of righteousness.'

'Noble Emperor, to take a vow and fulfil it oneself is very praiseworthy indeed, but it is altogether another and harder task to bring men to the path of righteousness,' said Dvaipaayana.

'I understand what you mean,' said Gangeya. 'I try to lead a righteous life myself, but I confess, I have not been able to change men's hearts.'

'Noble Gangeya, you are older than I in years and have better experience of men. Forgive me if I venture to make a suggestion. Living the life of *tapas* by onself is great, but greater is the power to stir the hearts of men', said Dvaipaayana.

'That is true, too', said Gangeya, speaking slowly as if he was talking to himself. 'What oppresses me day and night is that the strict life that I lead is misunderstood by others.'

'You are true to your vows, noble Gangeya', said Dvaipaayana. 'But the flame of your noble resolve has not lighted faith in many men. If the impression I have gathered is correct, the Kuru chiefs shudder at the prospect of being deprived of your leadership.'

Gangeya understood what Dvaipaayana was suggesting. He looked down for a moment, shook his head and with a solemn air, confessed, 'I was wrong in thinking that the matter was between me, my noble Father and my mother. People, I know, will talk. All kinds of motives are attributed to me or to Mother, though she has treated me as if I was her son.'

'Nothing will be said if you see that Chitrangada is installed as *Yuvaraj* immediately,' said Dvaipaayana.

Shantanu said : 'I am seriously perturbed about what the Kuru chiefs will do when I go to the Land of the Forefathers.'

Gangeya, in a low voice, said : 'You are right. The Kuru chiefs are looking forward to a war between those who want me to succeed and those who think that Chitrangada should succeed. Hastinapur will meet with disaster.'

'Find out the way to allay their anxiety yourself,' said the Emperor.

'If Father permits, the Rajya Sabha may be convened the day after tomorrow and Chitrangada can be installed as *Yuvaraj*. I will not only declare my pledges before the assembled chiefs, but will also declare my decision that I will uphold the throne of the Bharatas, whatever it may cost, and whoever is the ruler of Hastinapur.'

Dvaipaayana said : 'The noble Gangeya is right. Then he will become the flaming sword of *dharma*.'

'Call the Rajya Sabha before Dvaipaayana leaves us,' said Shantanu.

'I cannot stay here any longer. I have decided to leave Hastinapur in three days' time,' said Dvaipaayana.

'If Father so commands,' said Gangeya, 'the Rajya Sabha can be convened for the day after tomorrow. By then, as the venerable son of Paraashara says, Father will be able to walk a little.'

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CHAPTER 12

THE RAJYA SABHA

THE news that the Emperor had revived and was able to talk, spread like wild fire in Hastinapur. People rushed to the royal mansion to receive a *darshan* from the young ascetic who had worked the miracle.

Crowds also gathered in the temple of Pratipeshwar to secure his blessing. Among the crowd were the ailing and the maimed, who piteously appealed to the young ascetic to cure their afflictions. He responded to their greetings and wails with his boyish smile and blesssd everybody by raising his right hand.

So great was the crowd that, when he reached the visitors' grove in the temple grounds, the Minister, Kunik and the royal attendants had a hard time to see that a way was made for him to the place where he was to eat at night.

Dvaipaayana went to the river, performed the evening *sandhya*, worshipped Pratipeshwar, and returned to the grove.

During the treatment that he was giving to the Emperor, he took his meal only once in the evening after returning to the grove. By now, the Minister Kunik, who was in charge of looking after Dvaipaayana, had come to know what the guest's meal was like. The young ascetic took his food only after he had served the children who, attracted by the food, gathered there in increasing numbers everyday.

There was great excitement in Hastinapur when the royal mandate was announced :

> "The worship-worthy Emperor, the Best of Bharatas, announces to his beloved people of Hastinapur that he is practically cured of his ailment.
>
> "Tomorow, with the grace of the Great God Pratipeshwar, he will be able to give his *darshan* to the people from the terrace.
>
> "The Best of Bharatas has decided to convene the Rajya Sabha the day after tomorrow, six *ghatikas* after sunrise, when the noble Yuvaraj Gangeya will announce the vows he has taken to relinquish his office. Prince Chitrangada—may he live long— will then be installed as Yuvaraj.
>
> "The venerable Dvaipaayana, the Best of Ascetics, whose *mantra-vidya* gave life to the noble Emperor, will also attend the Rajya Sabha."

The announcement came as a thunderbolt to many of the Kuru chiefs who wanted Yuvaraj Gangeya to succeed the Emperor. Several of them were working to this and, notwithstanding the rumour that Prince Gangeya had pledged himself not to accept the throne. They attributed this installation of the Yuvaraj to the manoeuvres of the Empress Satyavati.

The ordinary people, however, were not interested in political intrigues and were jubilant that the Emperor, whom they loved, was well again. All that they wanted was the blessing of the young ascetic.

On the ninth day of the treatment, when it was ended, Dvaipaayana lent a hand to the Emperor, who, with trembling legs, stepped down from his couch and walked a few paces.

On the tenth day, after the treatment, the Rajya Sabha met in the morning. The leading *Srotriyas*, the Kuru chiefs and others entitled to attend the Rajya Sabha, gathered in an atmosphere of uneasy expectancy.

When the Emperor was brought on a couch into the hall, the members of the assembly rushed forward to touch his feet.

After the *Purohit* (the royal preceptor), Acharya Vibhuti and the leading *Srotriyas* had blessed the Rajya Sabha, Gangeya, handsome and dignified, addressed the assembly in his characteristic way, quietly but firmly.

'The noble Emperor, the Best of Bharatas, my revered father, is on the way to recovery. May the Gods grant him a long life.

'I took certain vows many years ago when my worship-worthy Father married the noble Empress Satyavati. In the absence of an authoritative announcement, all kinds of rumours have been current. This Rajya Sabha has been convened to enable me to tell you what the truth is.

'I have pledged myself neither to marry nor to claim the throne of Hastinapur.'

The assembly heard Gangeya in breathless silence. After a pause, he continued : 'I have further pledged myself to stand by the throne of Hastinapur as long as I live.

'I am deeply touched by the wish so often expressed by the leading Kuru chiefs that I should succeed to the throne of the Bharatas. That I cannot do.

'The noble Emperor, at my request, has decided to install my beloved brother Chitrangada as *Yuvaraj* of Hastinapur in my place. No one need feel perturbed !'

The majority of the members of the assembly were moved, some even to tears, but after a little while, they burst out into wild applause : "Jaya Gangeya."

Some chiefs however, were disappointed and almost angry because they felt that they had been slighted. It was all the work of the Empress. They were afraid that the power of Hastinapur would disappear under the leadership of a boy, but Prince Gangeya felt no room for doubt.

He continued : 'I want you to accept the decision of the Best of Bharatas; his wish is the mandate of the Gods; do not embarrass me by asking me to go back on my vows. I appeal to you to give the allegiance and loyalty which you have been giving me to Yuvaraj Chitrangada without a murmur of dissent. I have promised the Best of Bharatas that I will always stand by Hastinapur and its ruler, and with the blessing of the Great Gods, the power of Hastinapur will never decline so long as I am alive.'

The *Purohit*, Acharya Vibhuti, took over. Chitrangada was ceremonially installed as Yuvaraj before the sacred fire. The Emperor, lying on his bed, blessed him and placed the crown of the Yuvaraj on his head.

Dvaipaayana sat quietly, his eyes unflickering, a half-smile on his lips. He murmured to himself : 'Lord of Light, I thank you for bringing me here. Now the power of Hastinapur will stabilise *dharma* and Mother will be happy.'

When the Rajya Sabha was over, the couch on which the Emperor was lying was taken out by the attendants, attended by Gangeya, Chitrangada and Vichitraveerya.

As the assembly dispersed, many people came to touch the feet of Dvaipaayana. The old *Srotriyas* also came to him and blessed him.

It was with some difficulty that Kunik could get the assembly to make way for Dvaipaayana. The young ascetic left for the temple grounds, followed by the crowd.

The Empress had invited Dvaipaayana for a meal in the royal mansion, but he had courteously declined. He had replied : 'The children will be waiting for me in the mango-grove of the temple to share my meal. I cannot disappoint them.'

CHAPTER 13

"HERE IS THAT SON"

IN THE afternoon, Dvaipaayana visited the royal mansion to bid goodbye. When he came to meet the Emperor, Gangeya was in his usual seat, with his hand on his father's arm. On the bed, on the left, sat the Empress. The royal preceptor, Acharya Vibhuti, was also there on his seat.

As soon as Dvaipaayana entered the room, Gangeya asked the Minister, Kunik and the attendants to withdraw.

After a formal exchange of salutations, Gangeya again put his hand on his father's arm. 'Venerable Dvaipaayana, you are leaving tomorrow. Father, Mother and myself have discussed what you referred to the day before yesterday. Father is right. We must do something to discharge the debt we owe you. Tell us, please, in what way we can help you.'

'My first intention is to found an *ashram* in Dharmakshetra,' said Dvaipaayana.

'We here can order all preparations to be made,' said Gangeya.

'Not now,' said Dvaipaayana. 'I am going to the *ashrams* on the banks of the Yamuna where my father's disciples are waiting for me. I will assemble them and go to Dharmakshetra.'

'Did your father, the venerable Muni, leave disciples on the banks of the Yamuna ?' asked the Emperor.

'Yes. I know all about them,' said the Empress. 'When the venerable Muni's *ashram* was destroyed by Sahararjuna, most of his disciples were massacred. The senior disciples who were able to escape founded tiny *ashrams* on the banks of the Yamuna.' She spoke slowly and hesitantly, looking down all the time.

Gangeya turned to Dvaipaayana and asked : 'How did your father escape the holocaust ?'

'He happened to be absent when Sahasrarjuna came and burnt down his *ashram*. So he escaped being killed. He then continued to visit the *ashrams* of his disciples year after year; when I grew up, he also took me with him. During his journeyings, he inspired the *ashrams* to keep alive the discipline of righteous living, the worship of the Gods and reverence for the WORD. I am going to visit these *ashrams* and find out how many of the Twice-borns are willing to join me in establishing an *ashram* in Dharmakshetra,' said Dvaipaayana.

'Why go to the accursed place ?' asked Gangeya. 'We can find a vast area on the banks of the Gangaa where you can found an *ashram* of your own.'

Dvaipaayana shook his head. 'The *ashrams* on the banks of the Gangaa do not accept Father's discipline of righteous living.'

Acharya Vibhuti felt the remark a personal affront, as he was recognised as the patriarch of these *ashrams*. He was going to say something in their defence, but restrained himself.

Dvaipaayana continued : 'If righteous living is to be saved, we must re-build Dharmakshetra as a source of *dharma* on the sure foundation of lives dedicated to the WORD.'

Acharya Vibhuti's face was flushed with annoyance; this young ascetic was impertinent.

'Well, the choice is yours', said Gangeya. 'I will send hunters and foresters to destory the wild beasts and clear the jungle.'

'What more would you like us to do ?' asked the Emperor.

Dvaipaayana thought for a while, his eyes clouded for a moment. Then he looked up and addressed the Emperor: 'Best of Bharatas, with the might of the Kurus, you dealt a final blow to the Haihaya hordes. That is why the Field of Wolves is rightly called "Kurukshetra".'

Dvaipaayana was silent for a few moments. He again fixed his gaze on the ground as if he was seeking inspiration from the Lord of Light. Then he spoke : 'The noble Emperor has been a conqueror; he has been accepted by many kings as the *Chakravarti*. Yet, out of modesty, the Best of Bharatas has not performed one of the great sacrificial ceremonials—*Vajpeya*, *Rajasuya* or *Aswamedha*, which he was entitled to perform.'

Dvaipaayana was again silent for a few moments. All those sitting there looked at him expectantly.

'Noble Emperor', he said, 'the WORD gave you life; it was a sign from the God Surya that Dharmakshetra would be redeemed by you. It is only proper that you should perform one of the great sacrificial ceremonials at Dharmakshetra.'

Acharya Vibhuti could not remain silent any longer. Dvaipaayana, he felt was casting his net very wide. 'How can the noble Emperor, in his present condition, travel to the Field of Wolves ?' he asked.

'*Vajpeya*, as the venerable Acharaya knows, can be concluded in 17 days. It does not occupy months and years like the other elaborate ceremonials. The noble Emperor can travel by stages; there will be no strain on his health. If he wants, I will accompany him,' said Dvaipaayana.

'It is a grave risk which I, as the *Purohit*, would not like the Emperor to run,' said Acharya Vibhuti.

'Nevertheless, I feel sure that the Lord of Light gave back his life to the noble Emperor in order that he should celebrate a great sacrifice at Dharmakshetra. With the noble Emperor as sacrificer, all the Kuru chiefs will be there; the rulers who acknowledge him as *Chakravarti*, will also attend, and also other royal guests. The *Srotriyas*, I am sure, will come in their hundreds, and I should not be surprised, if after the *Vajpeya* is over, some of the leading *Srotriyas* decide to have their *ashrams* there. Once again *Brahmatej* will be wedded to the radiant valour of the Kurus,' said Dvaipaayana.

The Emperor turned his eyes towards his son and said : 'The wishes of the venerable Dvaipaayana must be fulfilled.'

'As Father commands,' replied Gangeya. 'I will at once depute the Minister Kunik to send hunters and foresters to the Field of Wolves to clear it of wild beasts and remove the jungle growth. Kunik will come with you, venerable Dvaipaayana, and make preparations for the *Vajpeya*.'

'I must now beg to take leave of you, noble Gangeya,' said Dvaipaayana. 'As I told you, I have to assemble my father's disciples and bring them with me. Perhaps I can induce the whole Paraashara *gotra* to assemble in Dharmakshetra. I should like to do it as early as possible because I have consulted the planets and four days before the full moon comes to Chitra would be the most auspicious time to begin the *Vajpeya*.'

The Emperor turned to the *Purohit*, Acharya Vibhuti, and said : 'Venerable Acharya, please make things ready for the *Vajpeya* as early as you can.'

The *Purohit* said in deliberate tones : 'The Best of Bharatas will, please, forgive me. I am getting old. My health is very poor. I cannot take this responsibility.'

Dvaipaayana turned to the *Purohit* and said respectfully : 'Venerable Acharya, you are the master of the WORD. The *Srotriyas* on the banks of the Gangaa look to you for guidance. If the noble Emperor holds the *Vajpeya*, you must be the *Adhvaryu*, the leading ritualist.'

'Noble Emperor, with the outspoken views which the Best of Ascetics has about the *ashrams* on the banks of Gangaa, it is useless to ask me to preside over the *Vajpeya*,' said the *Purohit* without replying directly to Dvaipaayana.

'I beg you to forgive me if I offended you, Venerable Acharya,' said Dvaipaayana, folding his hands in apology. 'But I have lived in some of them with my venerable father and know that they are not particular about maintaining the vows strictly.'

'Dvaipaayana, I have not the power of the WORD as you have,' said the Acharya and shook his head. 'It is difficult for me to be the head ritualist at a ceremonial where the *Chaturved*, the four-fold WORD, is recited. My life has been dedicated to *Trayi-Vidya*, the three-fold WORD. Please do not press me to join the *Vajpeya*.'

Dvaipaayana was silent for a few moments. Then he looked appealingly at the Acharya. 'Venerable *Srotriya*, is there no way to settle this ancient feud? Has not the divine WORD enjoined that knowledge should be welcome from whatever source it comes ?'

The Emperor put up his feeble hand to indicate that he wanted to speak. Looking at the *Purohit*, he said : 'The venerable Dvaipaayana has given me life. Yesterday's Rajya Sabha was also successful because of his advice. We must all carry out his wishes.'

The Acharya said : 'The noble Emperor is right. We must do what the Best of Sages, Dvaipaayana, suggests, but let me not take part in it. I cannot destroy the faith in which I have lived.' Behind the apologetic air of the Acharya, affronted dignity could be discerned.

Gangeya turned to the Acharya and said earnestly : 'Best of Acharyas, the Great God has given you an opportunity to settle this feud between the leading *Srotriyas*.'

'It is not a feud; it is a matter of faith,' said the Acharya, shaking his head. 'Honestly, sincerely, I believe that the WORD is only *Trayi-Vidya*, three-fold. How can I accept the Atharvana lore as part of it ?'

Dvaipaayana found himself in a great difficulty. He smiled. 'I do not want to bring the feud into the *Vajpeya*. It should be performed with the noble Acharya Vibhuti as the *Adhvaryu* (chief ritualist) in the way he approves of. I am glad that the venerable Acharya is so frank. He is only doing what my venerable great-grandfather, Mahamuni Vasistha, would have heartily applauded.'

The Acharya shook his head and looked at the Emperor with appealing eyes. 'Noble Emperor, I am an old man now. When Dvaipaayana performed the miracle, I immediately saw that my time as *Purohit* of the Kurus had come to an end. A younger man —perhaps the Best of Ascetics, Dvaipaayana himself—would be a suitable successor.'

Dvaipaayana interrupted in humility. 'Venerable Acharya, I do not accept favour or office. If I did, I could never serve the WORD in the way I wish.'

The Empress Satyavati was following the discussion very carefully. Suddenly she lifted the end of the scarf, which covered her face. With her eyes flashing with anger, her face glowing red like burnished copper, she spoke in clear, decisive accents : '*Aryaputra*, excuse me if I interrupt the conversation. I am a woman; I do not feel competent to speak on the differences between the three-fold WORD and the four-fold WORD.'

All the people sitting there, including the Emperor, were surprised at the way the Empress was speaking with angry eyes and in a vibrant voice. The Emperor sat up in his bed.

'Whatever the differences are between the *Srotriyas*, I will tell you what I am going to do,' said the Empress. Then she continued defiantly: 'Neither I nor my sons will attend any sacrificial sessions from which Dvaipaayana is excluded. *Vajpeya* or no *Vajpeya*, I am going to Kurukshetra myself to see that Dvaipaayana's *ashram* is founded there.'

She paused. Her eyes still glowing with anger, she added : 'I will see that the pledge of the venerable Muni ....' she stopped, she could not utter the name, '.... is redeemed.'

Every one was amazed. Nobody, not even the Emperor, had thought that the ever-smiling, ever-calm Empress was capable of exhibiting such anger.

The Empress turned to Acharya Vibhuti. 'Venerable Acharya, since I came to Hastinapur, you have been my *guru*. You have stood loyally by *Aryaputra*. I have a profound respect for your learning, but everything will be done as the *Aryaputra* wishes. I expect you to be the *Adhvaryu*, the leading ritualist, at the *Vajpeya*. *Aryaputra* is tired and would now like to take a rest. You can consult the leading *Srotriyas* of Hastinapur.' With irresistible dignity, she looked at the Acharya.

Dvaipaayana was carried away by a giant wave of adoration for his mother.

The Acharya bowed low, blessed them silently and left.

The atmosphere was so tense that Dvaipaayana rose to leave. He stood up, picked up the gourd in his left hand ....

He was on the point of extending his right hand to bless the Emperor and the Empress....

Before he could do so, the Empress, with a commanding gesture, stopped him from blessing the Emperor and herself.

'Not in that way,' she said, pointing at Dvaipaayana's right hand. 'Krishna, you have been blessing *Aryaputra* and me every day by extending your arm. I will no longer be a party to such a lack of respect.'

Even the Emperor opened his eyes wide. He could not understand the significance of this strange explosion.

'Noble *Aryaputra*,' she addressed the Emperor in a soft, gentle and affectionate voice, 'Before we married, I told you that I had had a son, who was taken away by his father.' She pointed a finger at Dvaipaayana and said :

'HERE IS THAT SON.'

The Emperor looked at her, then at Dvaipaayana and felt that the Empress was going mad.

'Krishna, fall at the feet of the Emperor; he is in the place of your venerable father—a god to you,' she said.

CHAPTER 14

AN UNEXPECTED ALLY

PILOTED by the Minister, Kunik, Dvaipaayana came to the temple grove to be received by a crowd of worshippers craving for his blessing or a cure for their ailments.

After the evening ritual was over, Dvaipaayana, as usual, had his meal after he had blessed the ailing and distributed food to the children. When the crowd was persuaded to disperse by the attendants, he asked Kunik to show him the way to the house of Acharya Vibhuti.

After threading through a maze of narrow lanes, they came to the royal *Purohit's* residence. It had large grounds; on one side, there was a pen with about a dozen cows, some of which were being milked by the women of the household; from an annexe on the other side came the voice of the disciples, chanting the *mantras*. In the middle of the court-yard, in front of the house, was a *vedi* for the sacred fire.

At this time Acharya Vibhuti was sitting holding a consultation on a side verandah, with Brahmistha, his 90 year-old father, a shrunken old figure with faded eyes, his right arm shaking with palsy, three elderly *Srotriyas* who shared, with Acharya Vibhuti, the leadership of the *ashrams* on the banks of the Gangaa and two middle-aged sons of his, both highly trained in the doctrines and rituals of *Trayi Vidya*. All of them, except Brahmistha, wore *dhotis* of silk and had gold armlets, insignia of their high position in the State.

They were taken aback when Kunik came to the verandah and announced the arrival of Dvaipaayana—the very person whose action they were discussing.

After Dvaipaayana had touched the feet of all the *Srotriyas*, Acharya Vibhuti said : 'Son of Paraashara, be seated,' and pointed to a seat next to his sons and added : 'We did not expect you.' Vibhuti's voice by no means warm or pleasant, registered the annoyance which they all felt at his visit.

Dvaipaayana did not take the seat pointed out by Vibhuti, but sat in front of him as a disciple would. Worshipful Acharya, I myself felt that after what happened today, my visit would appear strange,' he said. He then paused and added : 'However, I felt sure that Worshipful Acharya would not turn out a *Srotriya* who has come to his house in humility to beg a favour.'

My doors are always open to a *Srotriya*,' said Vibhuti loftily;

his attitude was scarcely consistent with the words he spoke.

'Best of Acharyas, I have come to beg of you to prescribe for me the expiatory ritual for having cast a slur on the *ashrams* on the banks of the Gangaa,' said Dvaipaayana.

'Vibhuti tells me that you are the son of Muni Paraashara. I remember him as a young boy,' said old Brahmistha, roofing his eyes with the palm of his hand to see Dvaipaayana's face clearly. He added : 'I was then in the *ashram* of the venerable Maha Muni Vasistha.'

Vibhuti stiffened. He asked : 'What is the point of asking me to prescribe the expiation ? If you think that you have committed a sin, the canons which you know will indicate to you the appropriate ritual.'

'Because I feel that you have not forgiven me,' said Dvaipaayana with his boyish smile which, though always so irresistible, created no impression.

'What does it matter whether I have forgiven you or not ?' asked Vibhuti rudely.

'It matters to me, Worshipful. If my apology had been sincere, you would have forgiven me. Why should I expect perfection in others when I am imperfect myself ?' asked Dvaipaayana and added : 'Will you permit me, Worshipful, to make a request ?'

Vibhuti lost patience and with harsh emphasis, said : 'If the request relates to *Vajpeya*, I reject it before you make it.'

'Why not listen to me ?' asked Dvaipaayana. 'The Gods listen to the prayers even of sinners.'

The face of all the persons sitting there, except that of the old Brahmistha, bore a smile of contempt. The old man, however, cupped his ear in his hand to catch words of Dvaipaayana's, and by a gesture, indicated that Dvaipaayana should proceed.

'All right, say what you want to in as few words as you can,' said Vibhuti. He suppressed a desire to turn this young ascetic out, and resigned himself to go through this ordeal as best he could.

'Worshipful, as I said, I want to expiate the offence I have given you,' said Dvaipaayana. He waited for some response from Vibhuti, but none was forthcoming. Then he resumed : 'My prayer to the Worshipful Acharya is that he may be pleased to leave me out of the *Vajpeya*.'

'. . . . and invite the wrath of the Empress,' commented Acharya Vibhuti with a sneer.

'The noble Empress will not, I am sure, be angry, if she is told that being guilty of an offensive remark, I am not fit to take part in the *Vajpeya*,' said Dvaipaayana.

'Have you studied the *Trayi Vidya* ?' asked the old Brahmistha in his husky voice.

'Yes, Worshipful Sir,' replied Dvaipaayana, with his hands joined.

'Under whom did you study it ?'

'Under my father, the venerable Muni Paraashara.'

'Do you know how to conduct the *Vajpeya* ?'

'I have conducted *Soma Yaga*[1], but not a *Vajpeya*,' replied Dvaipaayana.

Acharya Vibhuti intervened sarcastically. 'Whether you are or not competent to conduct the *Vajpeya* makes no difference. I am not going to be associated with it.'

Dvaipaayana looked down for a while and then said : 'Best of Acharyas, I want you to show me a way out of the situation which I have foolishly created. I want to eliminate myself from the *Vajpeya*.'

Vibhuti was now angry and interrupted : 'You can do what you like. We have decided what I should do. I will give up the office of *Purohit* of the Kurus and renounce the world by taking *sanyastha*.'

'Please don't think of that,' said Dvaipaayana with his palms joined. 'The Emperor has decided to celebrate the *Vajpeya*, and you alone can carry out the decision.'

Vibhuti shook his head. 'You want the Emperor and Empress both to think that somehow I tricked you out of the *Vajpeya*. At my age, I do not want to be classed as an intriguer,' he said firmly.

Dvaipaayana looked appealingly at Vibhuti. 'They will never think that. They will understand why I have desisted.'

'I know them better than you do, young man,' said Vibhuti curtly.

'May I be permitted to tell you what prompted me to suggest holding the *Vajpeya* ?' asked Dvaipaayana.

Vibhuti shook his head, but his old father, Acharya Brahmistha, intervened : 'You may.' He was attentively listening to the conversation with his hand cupped to his right ear.

'Worshipful Sir, my father, the venerable Paraashara, was very clear about the situation,' said Dvaipaayana. 'The fate of *dharma* is in the balance. The *Srotriyas*, its guardians, are divided in faith and discipline. The *ashrams*, for want of co-ordination, are losing their influence. If they do, the Gods will forsake us; the sanctity of the WORD will disappear; *dharma* will collapse. Every effort, therefore, should be made to save it.' The apostolic fervour with which his father talked on this subject was reflected in his own voice, face and demeanour.

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[1] Sacrificial ceremonies which can be finished in a day.

'Don't blame the *Srotriyas* for this,' said Devayaana, one of the elderly Acharyas present. 'They are doing their best.'

'Are they ?' asked old Brahmistha.

'They are,' said Devayaana. 'Like all young men, you cannot approve of the work which your elders have done. They had a hard time building up the *ashrams* during the confusion that followed the war, at great risk to themselves, and without any support.'

Acharya Vibhuti sat in sullen silence. He did not care to prolong this conversation with the young ascetic who appeared to be an adept in discussions, but he could not stop the elderly *Srotriyas* nor his father from carrying on the conversation.

'Worshipful Sir, have the *Srotriyas* of today the same zeal to maintain the Eternal Ordinances of the WORD—to live in *Brahmacharya*, dedicated to the WORD, or to enter upon *Grahasthasramam*, to build up righteous living in the family, and maintain the sanctity of marriage ?' asked Dvaipaayana.

'You were not born when Sahasrarjuna's war shook the very roots of righteous living,' replied Devayaana.

'That is true, Worshipful. But how can we strengthen them except by enriching the soil in which they are embedded ?' asked Dvaipaayana.

By a gesture, the old Acharya, Brahmistha, prevented Vibhuti from ending the conversation. 'How do you propose to strengthen the roots ?' he asked.

'For years and years, my venerable father discussed the problem; the solution, he found, was that a new race of *Srotriyas* must be reared with a fresh zest to live in *dharma*,' said Dvaipaayana.

'Words, words, idle words,' Vibhuti commented. He wanted to cut short the discussion, but his old father, Brahmistha, again held up a hand : 'How would you do that ?' he asked.

'We must lead back the *Srotriyas* to a life of *tapas*, rigorous self-discipline; give them faith in the WORD; infuse the *Srotriyas*, the Kshatriyas and the Vaishyas and those whom they want to uplift, with the faith to create a new world,' replied Dvaipaayana.

'What is the way to achieve their aims ? Tell me in detail,' said the old Acharya Brahmistha.

The faces of Vibhuti and the *Srotriyas* registered annoyance at the old man's persistence, but there was no way to stop him once he was interested in a subject.

'I had hoped', said Dvaipaayana, 'that the *Vajpeya*, sponsored by the noble Emperor and performed under the leadership of the

Worshipful Acharya Vibhuti, would restore Dharmakshetra as the centre from which the stream of *dharma* would flow; the heart of every *Srotriya*—why, every man and woman,—would be stirred; the *kshatra-tej* of the Kurus would be harnessed to the *brahma-tej* of the *Srotriyas* under the leadership of the worshipful Acharya.

'You are still a boy,' said Acharya Devayaana impatiently. 'The present outlook of the *Srotriyas* has little need of change.'

'I suppose, in your scheme of things,' said Vibhuti with a sneer, 'the new vitality will come only by a leading Atharvan being associated with me in the performance of the *Vajpeya*.'

'Young man,' he continued with withering contempt, do not let your fancy run away with you. If I attend a ceremonial with which a leading Atharvan is associated, *dharma* will be in chaos.' He shifted his position as if to rise.

Dvaipaayana, by a respectful gesture, requested the Acharya to remain seated. 'If you and a leading Atharvan come together as the head ritualists, a new enthusiasm and a new tradition will be created.'

'Let us not indulge in idle speculation,' said Acharya Vibhuti contemptuously and held out his hand to his father to enable the latter to rise.

'What do you know of the Atharvana lore ?', the old man persisted ignoring Vibhuti's hand.

'I hope to study the whole lore after the *Vajpeya*, as soon as I have a *guru* qualified to teach me,' replied Dvaipaayana.

'I will never be a party to the Atharvana lore being included in the WORD,' interrupted Vibhuti. 'Never, never, never,' he repeated with emphasis. Then with a sneer, he shifted his scarf from one shoulder to the other and again held out his hand to enable his father to rise from his seat.

As a crushing blow, he added : 'I know what you want; you want a spectacular background to emerge as the most pre-eminent among the *Srotriyas* of Aryavarta.'

Vibhuti's insinuation came as a whip-lash to Dvaipaayana. He shivered. He looked down, lost in thought. A sudden change came over him. His shoulders hunched, his eyes lost their brilliance, his lips trembled; he became a tragic image of desolation. Complete silence prevailed.

He silently invoked his guardian deity, the God Surya. 'Lord of Light, have you forsaken me ?' he muttered to himself.

The older *Srotriyas* could not but enjoy the discomfiture of the young ascetic.

'Forgive me, Worshipful Acharya, for what I have said and done,' said Dvaipaayana and stopped. There was a break in his voice. After a few moments, he folded his hands and muttered : 'I realize that my *tapas* is not adequate to convert my dream into a reality.'

He prostrated himself before the *Purohit* and his father, touched the feet of the other *Srotriyas*, took his gourd and staff, and turned to go....

Old Brahmistha raised his feeble and shrunken hand and beckoned him. 'Dvaipaayana, come back. Why are you going? Sit down.'

'Father, Father,' said Vibhuti placing a restraining hand on his father. 'Let him go.'

'Listen, Vibhuti,' the old man raised his trembling hand. Decades of authority which he had exercised as the patriarch of the *Srotriyas* was reflected in his voice and gesture. 'There is something in what this boy says. If the change which he hopes for comes to pass, the WORD will become invincible and the *Srotriyas* will be restored to their former strength.'

'What are you saying, Father?', asked Vibhuti in amazement. 'You of all the people in the world!'

'What I say is according to reason,' the old man rejoined. 'I have been a party to the feud on the content of the WORD. But what this boy says is right, it has created a rift among the *Srotriyas*, and deprived them of the capacity to uplift men. The feud must be settled.'

Vibhuti looked puzzled. He gazed from his father to Dvaipaayana. A doubt arose in his mind : Had the young ascetic worked Atharvan sorcery on his father? Were his father's words really his? 'Don't ask me, Father, to accept the four-fold WORD,' he said pathetically.

The old man changed his position and turned his face towards his son. His eyes, though faded, had an air of finality. 'Are you unwilling to join the *Vajpeya* because some learned Atharvan might become *Brahmaa*, one of the head ritualists, and recite the Atharvana lore?' he asked.

'You taught me not to compromise on the three-fold WORD,' said Vibhuti.

Seeing his father excited, Vibhuti placed a hand on his arm, which was shaking violently, and said : 'Let Dvaipaayana depart, Father. We will think the matter over coolly.'

'Why should he depart?' asked Brahmistha in a quaking but irresistible voice. In all my life I have not known a *Srotriya* like this young man. He has both faith and vision; we may not have another like him for generations.' He turned to Dvaipaayana, roofing his eyes with his hand to have a better look at Dvaipaayana.

'My son, go and begin your preparations for the *Vajpeya*. I see that *dharma* cannot be revived if the feud between the *Srotriyas* goes on. If Vibhuti renounces the world, I will resume the office of *Purohit* of the Kurus, which I gave up in his favour and preside at the *Vajpeya*.'

The *Srotriyas* sitting there were angry at the old man's decision, but did not know what to say or do.

The old man, in his trembling voice, addressed Dvaipaayana. 'My son, do not be disheartened. I was one of the leading young *Srotriyas* in the *ashram* of your great-grandfather Maha Muni Vasistha. I had my share in the quarrel. But you are right, my son. The war has changed the situation. We must stop the disintegration of *dharma* at any cost. I will preside over the *Vajpeya*. Find a learned Atharvana to officiate as *Brahmaa*.'

He took hold of Vibhuti's hand and rose on his tottering feet. 'I want to see this feud ended; then I can go to the Land of my Forefathers happily. My blessing,' he extended his hand over Dvaipaayana, paused for a moment then uttered the words of greeting which were customary between two eminent *Srotriyas* : 'May your *tapas* increase.'

Dvaipaayana was overborne with gratitude.

Then the old man turned to Vibhuti. 'I am tired. I must have some sleep.'

CHAPTER 15

MAHA ATHARVAN LAYS A DEADLIER CHARM

MAHA Atharvan sat, wrapped in silence, in the Cave of Meditation, a little away from his *ashram*. He retired to the cave whenever he felt that his strength and vision were failing him.

For weeks he had been puzzled at the strange things that were happening to the Field of Wolves and was summoning all his meditative power to discover their significance.

Hunters had come in groups to clear the Field of wolves and other beasts of prey. They were followed by foresters who removed the undergrowth, cut down the creepers, enlarged the trails and cleared the ground around the five *Syamantak* lakes.

Every day a large number of villagers and foresters, with their families, used to come to the *ashram* to be cured of their ailments; to secure the help of *Yatu Vidya*, sorcery; to propitiate evil planets, or to obtain help in settling family or tribal quarrels. After their needs had been looked after by his disciples, they would approach the sacred fire for the *darshan* of Maha Atharvan, who sat like a distant god—the symbol of irresistible power, which could make the living dead or the dead alive.

Of late, the villagers had brought back strange rumours which revolved round the miraculous achievements of a young ascetic; how, for nine days, he had invoked his *mantra-vidya* to bring the Emperor Shantanu of Hastinapur back to life; how Yama, the God of Death, was vanquished by him.

The rumours also referred to a Rajya Sabha held in Hastinapur where Gangeya, the Crown Prince, announced that he had taken a vow : he would neither claim the throne nor marry, and so long as he lived, he would stand loyally by Hastinapur. It was said that Chitrangada, the elder of his step-brothers, was also installed as *Yuvaraj*. The young ascetic had then disappeared miraculously, some even claiming to have seen him flying away in the air.

Maha Atharvan's disciples felt that it was a challenge—a sacrilege. According to them, only Maha Atharvan could be the master of life and death.

All these rumours were duly reported to Maha Atharvan by his principal disciples and his son, Sumantu, and his favourite daughter, Vatikaa, who bustled around her father, busy with something or other, important or unimportant.

Somehow, Maha Atharvan could not dissociate these rumours from what was happening to the Field of Wolves. He was now bending all his powers to discover why things were happening in a way he disapproved of. All his efforts to unravel the mystery ultimately pointed in the same direction : the young ascetic, Dvaipaayana, who had escaped from his *ashram* before he could lay the death spell on him.

His meditation was interrupted. His eyes beheld a solitary figure climbing the hill to the *ashram*. A frown furrowed his brow. Dvaipaayana, the young upstart, had the effrontery to come back to him to flaunt his victory ! This time he must make no mistake, he must lay the death spell when the young ascetic reached his *ashram*.

Maha Atharvan could not meditate any further; he became impatient to deal with this young ascetic promptly.

Sumantu, his young son, came to the cave and stood at its mouth, awaiting permission to enter. Maha Atharvan was annoyed. He did not like to be disturbed in his meditation, particularly at this moment when he required all his powers to lay the death spell on this upstart.

'What is the matter ?' he asked Sumantu sharply.

'Father,' said Sumantu, touching his father's feet, 'Dvaipaayana has come back.'

'I know—the young upstart who left the *ashram* stealthily. He has incurred the wrath of the ancient seers, Bhrigu and Angiras. I do not want to see him,' the sage stated emphatically.

'He says that he has come to beg a favour of you, Father,' said Sumantu.

'A favour of me ! He will get only one favour,' said Maha Atharvan and, by a gesture, indicated the death spell.

'I told him that he had incurred your displeasure and that you, Father, would not see him; that he might as well go back,' said Sumantu.

'What did he reply ?'

'Strangely enough, he wanted the same thing as you, venerable Father, want. He said that he had come back so that you could fulfil your wish of laying the death spell on him—a disobedient disciple.'

'What ! ' exclaimed Maha Atharvan, unable to believe his ears. 'He wants me to lay the death spell on him ? Are you sure that he said that ?'

'Yes, Father,' replied Sumantu. 'He also said that he was *your* disciple and that he would not allow his *guru's* wish to remain unfulfilled. At first I thought that he was saying it in jest, but he was in dead earnest about it.'

'My disciple! The effrontery of it ! I have never accepted him as my disciple,' said Maha Atharvan.

'What shall I tell him, Father ?' asked Sumantu.

Maha Atharvan thought for a while, and closed his lips firmly. He murmured : 'The will of the venerable seers, Bhrigu and Angiras, shall prevail.' Then he turned to Sumantu and said : 'Call him here.'

Sumantu went out of the cave and returned with Dvaipaayana.

The young ascetic prostrated himself before Maha Atharvan and tried to touch his feet in salutation, but before he could do so, the sage withdrew them.

'I have come to seek your blessing, Master,' said Dvaipaayana in a penitent tone. 'I do not deserve it, I know, for I left the *ashram* without your permission. I have come to invite the penalty for such gross misbehaviour.'

'Invite the penalty!' contemptuously exclaimed Maha Atharvan. 'You don't understand the meaning of what you are saying.'

'Believe me, Master. I want you to lay your death spell on me—your disobedient disciple. That is why I have come back,' said Dvaipaayana with such earnestness that the sage for a moment thought that he had gone mad.

'You are not my disciple. I have never accepted you as one,' said Maha Atharvan.

'Best of *gurus*, last time I was here, I vowed that I was going to be your disciple,' said Dvaipaayana and added : 'As your disciple, I had to leave your *ashram* only to fulfil your heart's wish.'

'You fulfil my heart's wish ! Surely ? Do you know how to tell the truth ?' asked Maha Atharvan cynically.

'I took a vow to speak the truth when I was inducted into *Brahmacharya*. I have striven to live up to it.'

'What vows did you take ?' asked Maha Atharvan.

'The vows which every Twice-born takes.'

'Are there any other vows to which you are pledged ?' asked Maha Atharvan.

'Under instructions from my father, all members of the Paraashara *gotra* swear an additional oath, *Paraashara Vrata*, the pledge of Paraashara,' said Dvaipaayana.

'Did you take it ?' asked Maha Atharvan.

'Yes', replied Dvaipaayana.

'What is it ?'

> " *I shall refrain from inflicting injury;*
> *I shall not appropriate another man's wealth;*
> *I shall always speak the truth and nothing else;*

I shall give away whatever I have to a needy and worthy
man at the appropriate time;
I shall refrain from talking about young women;
I shall cut short the flow of greed and desire;
I shall worship the Gods and the Forefathers;
I shall live for the WORD;
I shall seek the favour of the WORD, for it
upholds Rita, *the Cosmic Order.*"

'There is a flaw in the vow,' said Maha Atharvan contemptuously. 'By the word "WORD", you understand the three-fold WORD.'

'No, Master. My father said that the WORD was four-fold. All the Twice-borns of the Paraashara *gotra* understand it in this way. I have dedicated myself not only to the three-fold WORD, but to the complete WORD. Without the Atharvana lore, the body cannot be saved from ailments, nor royalty from disaster, so Father said,' said Dvaipaayana, with his eyes lowered in veneration.

The manner in which Dvaipaayana repeated the vows impressed Maha Atharvan. He said : 'Tell me the truth : Why have you come back ?' His tone had lost its severity.

'As I told you, Master, I have come back so that you may lay the death spell on me. I left the *ashram* only to see that my *guru's* mission was fulfilled,' said Dvaipaayana apologetically.

'My mission fulfilled !' exclaimed the exasperated Maha Atharvan, his curiosity about this strange young man aroused. 'How do you know what my mission is ?'

'May I speak frankly ?' asked Dvaipaayana.

'Speak frankly—also truthfully,' said Maha Atharvan with a cynical smile.

'The venerable Maha Atharvan laid a curse on Dharmakshetra because the *rishis* led by my great-grandfather, Vasistha, would not accept the Atharvana lore as a part of the WORD; because the Atharvana's privilege to be appointed *Brahmaa*, one of the four leading ritualists, at a sacrificial session was denied; and because the Atharvana lore was looked down upon by those who followed the *Trayi Vidya*, the three-fold WORD,' said Dvaipaayana.

Maha Atharvan was surprised at the way the young ascetic had gauged his unexpressed thoughts. 'What follows on this ?' he asked.

'I have secured a promise from the noble Emperor Shantanu of Hastinapur that *Vajpeya* will be performed in Dharmakshetra. You or whomsoever you like, shall be the fourth head ritualist, *Brahmaa*.'

'This is idle talk,' said Maha Atharvan. 'The leading *Srotriyas* of Hastinapur have rejected *Brahma-Vidya.*'

'The Gods and the seers gave your *mantra-vidya* the power to bring the Emperor back to life,' said Dvaipaayana.

'Who taught you this *mantra-vidya* ?' asked Maha Atharvan.

'My father taught me the *mantra-vidya* he knew; it was to cure ailments; but its important incantations, to bring back a man to life, was taught me by my venerable *guru*,' said Dvaipaayana respectfully, joining his palms.

'I did that !' exclaimed Maha Atharvan angrily. 'You are telling lies.'

'No, I learnt the *mantras* from you,' said Dvaipaayana.

'But I never taught you,' said Maha Atharvan puzzled. 'I never teach them even to my disciples.'

'You did, Master. When Paila was revived by you, you recited the *mantras* and I learned them. And when he was brought here and again when you chanted the *mantras* over Paila, I verified whether what I had retained in my memory was correct. And I also learned from you how to transmit life force to the dead,' said Dvaipaayana.

Maha Atharvan's eyes betrayed disbelief. 'With words, cadence and accent in such perfection ?' he asked.

'Yes, venerable Master,' replied Dvaipaayana. 'The *mantra* which I had retained in my memory, as chanted by me, brought the Emperor Shantanu back to life. That shows that I have been able to recite it correctly.'

Maha Atharvan was interested. 'You did it without the saving herb ?' he asked.

'No. I had it,' replied Dvaipaayana with a smile.

'Where did you get it from ?' asked Maha Atharvan.

Dvaipaayana's face reflected sly amusement. 'My *guru's ashram* provided me with it.'

'Don't go on repeating that you are my disciple. I have not accepted you as one,' said Maha Atharvan.

'You have, venerable Master. Otherwise, how could you have laid the death spell on me for leaving your *ashram* without your permission ?' asked Dvaipaayana.

Maha Atharvan's glittering eyes became soft. He moved his hand over his yellowish beard, his lips twitching as if he was going to smile. 'Who is going to officiate the sacrificial sessions ?' he asked.

'It will be performed in Dharmakshetra, with the venerable *guru* as the *Brahmaa.*'

'You have also decided that for me ?' asked Maha Atharvan sharply, but the edge of the remark was blunted.

'Yes Master, so that your heart's wish that the Atharvana lore may be accepted as an integral part of the WORD shall be fulfilled.'

'Why do you say that ?' asked Maha Atharvan.

'Because the Emperor Shantanu as well as the royal *Purohit*, Vibhuti, have left it to me to find a learned Atharvan to officiate as *Brahmaa* at the sacrificial ceremonial, the *Vajpeya*,' said Dvaipaayana. Then he paused for a few moments and respectfully added : 'Now that you are laying the death spell on me, the matter is different. Otherwise, you Master, would have taught me the whole of the Atharvana lore.'

The sage ignored this and was silent for a few moments. He suddenly changed the subject. 'Is it true that you vanished into thin air, as the rumours say?' he asked.

'The crowds had become very oppressive. They would not let me be in peace, and if the sacrificial sessions were to begin in time, there had to be a Paraashara *ashram* in Dharmakshetra dedicated to the complete WORD.'

'Is there anything else that you achieved ?' asked Maha Atharvan.

'Yes, something which, but for your blessing, I would not have secured. I requested the Emperor, the Best of Kurus, and Prince Gangeya that the radiant power of the WORD (*Brahmatej*) should always remain allied with the radiant valour (*Kshatratej*) of the of the Kurus,' said Dvaipaayana.

'What did they say ?' asked Maha Atharvan.

'Both the Emperor and the Prince agreed with me that without such an alliance, neither *dharma* nor the State would survive and promised that it should be so.'

Maha Atharvan's expression showed interest. 'Tell me, did you really vanish into the air ?'

'I did not vanish into the air, but in the early morning I left Hastinapur before the crowds could pester me. I went to the *ashram* at Godhuli, where my father was cremated, and then to the different *ashrams* established by his disciples on the banks of Mother Yamuna. Forty of the *Srotriyas*, with their dependents—among them some Acharyas with their families—have now come with me to build an *ashram* in Dharmakshetra,' said Dvaipaayana and added: 'The noble Empress, Satyavati, has also given three hundred cows for the *ashram* we are to found.'

'When are they coming ?' asked Maha Atharvan.

'They are at the foot of the hill, waiting for your blessing.'

'The folly of it !—you want to establish an *ashram* in the Field of Wolves, the accursed place?' remarked Maha Atharvan.

'Not I, Gurudev, long before that time comes, your death spell will have sent me to the Land of the Forefathers. Father's senior disciples have promised that, if I am not alive then, they will accept Sumantu as their *guru*', said Dvaipaayana.

Maha Atharvan's eyes sparkled with humour. 'You are the most dishonest man I have ever seen. You claim to be my disciple and yet disobey me; you run away from the *ashram*, that too without my permission. You took the saving herbs from my *ashram* like a thief. You revived Shantanu with the Atharvana *mantras* without my permission. I cannot understand how you came to do it. None of my disciples, though they can chant the *mantras* and use the saving herbs, has been able to bring a dying or a dead person to life.'

Dvaipaayana laughed like a naughty boy. 'I am sorry, I did not follow the example of your disciples. Gurudev, I myself do not understand how I did it, for, when treating the Emperor, I felt I ceased to exist and the power of the Word was being transmitted to the dying Emperor without my knowing it.'

Maha Atharvan was silent for a minute. 'That may be the reason for your success,' he murmured in a low voice as if to himself. Then the old mood re-possessed him. 'You are not fit to be my disciple. Now you have decided to establish an *ashram* without consulting me. You bring me disciples and hundreds of cows which I never wanted. Without my permission, you have appointed Sumantu the head of your *ashram*. And you want me to accept the word of the Kurus, which I never trust, that they will stand by *dharma*.'

The sage was indignant. 'Now you want me to place the death spell on you so that you may escape the responsibility for building your Dharmakshetra and fasten it on me,' he said and looked sternly at Dvaipaayana. 'I will not have it. I will not look at your *ashram* nor at your disciples nor at your cows.' The sage sniffed in contempt.

'Venerable Master, will you do me a favour? Will you allow Sumantu to adopt Father's disciples?' asked Dvaipaayana.

'No, I will not,' said the sage firmly. Then his voice lost its sternness. 'I shall put another—a more dreadful—spell on you.' Amusement was in his eyes.

'Yes, Master. Whatever you say shall be accomplished.'

'I will put a charm, more deadly than the death spell on you.' The sage found it difficult to suppress a smile. 'It will make Vatikaa go mad about you. I want to be rid of this nuisance of a girl, who sits listening to all my talk, messes up my affairs and betrays me by handing over the saving herb to you,' said Maha Atharvan.

'I am sure, she must be hovering around us, hiding in some corner and listening to what we are saying' The ascetic lines on his face disappeared for a moment. He was smiling.

'You are the Master. Whatever spell you lay upon me shall be fulfilled,' replied Dvaipaayana and for a moment his face registered triumph.

The sage clapped his hands, and to the attendant who came in response, he said : 'Go and bring Vatikaa here; she must be somewhere near this hut.'

The attendant left. Soon running feet were heard and Vatikaa came in. 'Did I not tell you that she would be hovering around this place, Dvaipaayana ?' said Maha Atharvan.

The sage's attitude softened; Vatikaa was his darling child. 'What do you want me for, Father ?' asked Vatikaa, flinging back two of her braids which had fallen over her bosom.

'You were listening to our conversation ?' asked Maha Atharvan.

'No, Father,' replied Vatikaa with a smile. 'I was only standing behind the rear door, so that I could be useful to you immediately you wanted me. You were speaking so loudly that I could not help hearing you.'

'Liar ! I am now laying a dreadful charm on Dvaipaayana for being a disobedient disciple and on you for having stolen my saving herb,' said Maha Atharvan and closed his eyes for a few moments. Then, concentrating his gaze on Dvaipaayana, he said in a solemn voice : 'Dvaipaayana, fall in love with Vatikaa.'

'Yes, Master, I obey,' replied Dvaipaayana and instinctively looked at Vatikaa and felt a yearning for her.

The sage then turned to Vatikaa and said : 'Vatikaa, fall in love with Dvaipaayana.'

Vatikaa bashfully looked at Dvaipaayana and felt as if he was living in her heart. 'Yes, Father,' she replied.

'And thus will the love charm of the ancient seers, Bhrigu and Angiras, be fulfilled,' said Maha Atharvan.

Vatikaa threw a side glance at Dvaipaayana and Dvaipaayana was smiling.

'Go now,' Maha Atharvan told both of them. 'Don't sit here looking like idiots.The disciples of Muni Paraashara are waiting at the foot of the hill. Bring them to the *ashram* and make them comfortable till Dvaipaayana builds his hermitage. Sumantu, find out the next auspicious day and take Vatikaa off my hands.'

Chapter 16

VATIKAA FEELS UNHAPPY

According to the practice enjoined by the Vedas, if the father so liked—and in most cases he did *not*—a daughter could be invested with the sacred thread, and put through the discipline of a *Brahmacharini* (celibate girl-studentship) for twelve years, studying the WORD and undergoing rigorous self-discipline. She would then enjoy the status and privilege of a *Srotriya*, a privilege denied to women who had not undergone it.

Following this tradition, Maha Atharvan had invested Vatikaa with the sacred thread when her twin-brother Sumantu was so invested. Both of them had recently completed their twelve years of discipline.

Besides, Vatikaa had the privilege, generally enjoyed by the youngest daughter of the family, of being effusively devoted to her father. She was also his beloved child. Though she played all sorts of pranks, the stern—and to many, terrifying—Maha Atharvan Jaabaali indulgently smiled at her trespasses.

Vatikaa had a mind of her own in spite of her very strong-minded father. On completing the period of studentship, she was looking forward to marriage with a suitable *Srotriya*. No sooner had she seen Dvaipaayana's irresistible smile, and heard him reciting the *Hymn to Lord Varuna* on the banks of the Sarasvati, than the idea of marrying him seized her.

Later, when she heard Dvaipaayana telling her father about his life's mission and his unique achievement of bringing life back to Shantanu, she needed no love-charm to fall madly in love with him. It would be a wonderful future, she thought, building up Dharmakshetra in association with him.

She joined Dvaipaayana, Sumantu and Paila, who was now fully recovered, when they came down the hill to invite the inmates of the Paraashara *ashram*, as Dvaipaayana had named it, to be the guests of her father's *ashram*.

So far she had only seen the life in her father's *ashram* and the *ashrams* of some of his principal disciples when she had accompanied him on his journeyings; naturally, therefore, she was excited at seeing Dvaipaayana's travelling *ashram*.

The inmates of the Paraashara *ashram*, Dvaipaayana had told her, were principally drawn from the *ashrams* founded by the disciples of his father, Muni Paraashara, on the banks of the Yamuna.

On its long journey to Dharmakshetra, the *ashram*, though on the move for the best part of the day, kept up its daily routine scrupulously. It was an odd assortment, this travelling *ashram*. Its vitality was maintained by every member of the *ashram* doting on Dvaipaayana and sharing his faith that Dharmakshetra would be resurrected.

The principal Acharya was Gautama, the senior surviving disciple of Muni Paraashara. When Vatikaa was introduced to him, he blessed her with a parental smile.

Besides Sharmi, Acharya Gautama's wife and their children, there were several Acharyas with their families and disciples; about a dozen celibate students dressed in deer-skins, with the prescribed staff and gourd in their hands; the dependants of the *ashrams* with their families; noisy children who thoroughly enjoyed the journey; the ailing, the old as well as children too small to walk, seated in the bullock-carts; a few stud bulls and several hundred cows, with their cowherds attending on them. Finally there were a few bowmen sent by the Emperor to secure their safety against any danger from wild beasts or Rakshasas.

Vatikaa's heart throbbed with joyful excitement when she saw how devoted the inmates of the *ashram* were to Dvaipaayana whom they called "Bal-Muni"—the Little Muni—to distinguish him from his father who was referred to as "the venerable Pangu Muni."

When she was introduced by Paila to the womenfolk as the daughter of Maha Atharvan and Bal-Muni's bride, they were in ecstasies. Vatikaa could not restrain her tears of joy when Acharya Gautama's wife Sharmi, a plump, maternal woman, after first scanning her up and down, accepted her completely and pressed her to her ample bosom, which established Sharmi's authority over her. Other elderly women took turns at welcoming her by an embrace. Vatikaa enjoyed the welcome, even though it smothered her.

The travelling *ashram* camped at the foot of the hill, the bullocks were unyoked and the cattle taken by the cowherds to be watered. The dependants busied themselves preparing their food.

The Twice-borns and their families went up the hill to pay their respects to Maha Atharvan.

The next day, Maha Atharvan, Dvaipaayana, Acharya Gautama, and several Acharyas from both the *ashrams*, went to the *Syamantak* lakes to select a suitable spot where the Paraashara *ashram* could be constructed.

A suitable spot on the margin of the third lake where the channel of the river Sarasvati was deep and wide, was selected.

The sacred fire was lighted and Mother Prithvi (Earth) was worshipped.

The Atharvana hymn invoking the Goddess Prithvi (Earth) was chanted by Maha Atharvan and his disciples :

> "Satya, *that is Truth, and* Rita, *the Cosmic Order,*
> *Rigorous self-discipline, which is* tapas.
> *Spiritual realisation, which is* Brahma,
> *And the deities presiding over the sacrificial ceremonials—*
> *May they all support Mother Prithvi............*
> *O, Mother Prithvi,*
> *Thou, the Mistress of what was and what shall be,*
> *Give us a broad domain !..................*
> *O, Mother Prithvi, be pleased to set us down*
> *Upon a well-set place.*
> *With Thy Spouse,* Dyaus (*the Heavens) co-operating,*
> *O Thou, Goddess of Wisdom,*
> *Let us live here in happiness and prosperity* !"

A pit was dug and sanctified. Two of the disciples caught hold a live tortoise, the emblem of stability, and to please the Goddess Prithvi, who rested on the Primeval Tortoise, placed it in the pit.

Vatikaa's heart overflowed with hope and joy. This would be her home, the home of her husband and her children from generation to generation, which the Gods would bless. And here the Paraashara *ashram* would arise, ringing with the WORD chanted in melodious cadences.

Vatikaa fell under Dvaipaayana's hypnotic spell. He behaved as if they had known each other for years, and whenever he spoke, his homely features were lit up by his inimitable boyish smile.

She soon discovered that his learning was fathomless. He knew the *Tryai Vidya* with its precise sequences, accent and cadences, to perfection; several Atharvana hymns, the use of herbs which could mitigate or cure ailments, and the movements and influence of the planets.

However, what amazed her most was how he would encourage though never a word of command or of complaint passed his lips. In the morning, at milking time, he was with the womenfolk of the *ashram* helping them. All the *Srotriyas* and the *Brahmacharis* of the *ashram* then joined him in lighting the sacred fire, and his melodious voice led the others in infusing the chants with a new life.

He rebuked no one, yet he would help anyone who had committed a lapse, to repair it and he would put a sluggard to shame, by inspiring him to work harder. Most of the elders of the Paraashara *ashram* had been trained in the hard school of Pangu Muni and the *ashram* soon reflected the austere discipline which Pangu Muni had taught them.

He would never fail to attend the sick and the ailing and distribute food to the children before taking his meal, and win over the hearts of the crowds which came for his *darshan* by his cheering words and happy smile.

During the days preceding their marriage, Vatikaa had avidly learnt all about her husband's exploits, which the talkative Sharmi was never tired of describing, never failing to attribute them to the inspiration and training of her husband. She had also told her how the Bal-Muni, when he was a boy, helped the womenfolk to clean the cattle and even milked the cows; how wonderful he looked when her *Aryaputra* invested him with the sacred thread, and how with loving care he brought the dead body of the venerable Muni to Godhuli.

Sharmi was, moreover, bubbling over with enthusiasm when she talked about the Empress, whom she had met at Hastinapur where the Paraashara *ashram* had halted on their way to Dharmakshetra. It was the brightest moment of her life—talking to a living Empress.

'Oh, the Empress, so slender, so beautiful, so gorgeously dressed!' she would exclaim every time she talked about her. 'She would come every day to where we had camped in the temple grounds of Pratipeshwar to serve food to Bal-Muni and *Aryaputra*.'

On such occasions, Vatikaa, would respond by a forced smile, but she felt unhappy.

On an auspicious day, the wedding of Dvaipaayana and Vatikaa was performed. Acharya Gautama, as Dvaipaayana's parental *guru*, received Vatikaa from her father, Maha Atharvan. The bride and the groom took the seven steps around the sacred fire. Love-charms were exchanged. Deer-skins were presented to both, for Vatikaa, having been a *Brahmacharini*, was entitled to wear one.

Vatikaa had looked forward to the intimate hours of the night when they would be together by themselves with dread. From the talks she had had with the womenfolk of the *ashram*, she had gathered the impression that when men met their wives at night, they were brutal. She was, therefore, frightened at the prospect of being mauled by a man and wondered whether she could ever overcome the horror of such treatment. And would she be able to please him as a wife ?

However, when they were together for the night, she was surprised to find Dvaipaayana totally different. His touch, she felt, was not brutal, not even proprietary, as of a master; it was as gentle as that of an affectionate mother. Dvaipaayana was always ready to respond to her unspoken wishes till, carried away in the flood of ecstasy, she surrendered to the joy of the moment of her own free will.

'Lord of my body and mind, I am thine,' she murmured, 'and I want be to you what Paulomi was to the primeval seer, Bhrigu.'

A joyful expression was on her husband's face every time the Empress was mentioned before him. She could not understand the significance of this change. By now, she knew her husband so well that his betraying the marriage vow was inconceivable.

A few days later, the Minister Kunik arrived from Hastinapur in a chariot. With him came several assistants, some of them armed with bows and arrows, and also a large number of foresters, who immediately began to cut bamboos and construct huts.

Kunik brought four cows with ample and generous udders, each with a keeper, and a stud bull, as presents from the Empress to Vatikaa. The cows were of a rare breed and were *Pancha-Kalyani*; their skin was glossy black, with five auspicious marks, a tuft of white hair, one on each of the ankles and one in the middle of the forehead. The stud bull, a majestic animal, pawing the earth and eyeing the cows purposefully, was kept at a distance by two cowherds.

Vatikaa suppressed her inclination to reject the gift from the Empress. But she dared not anger her husband; it would be an unforgivable insult offered to the Empress. 'What shall I do with the cows ?' she asked him.

'They are your cows and you can do whatever you like with them,' replied Dvaipaayana with a laugh. 'But, don't go near the bull, otherwise I will lose my wife.' Then he added : 'Isn't the noble Empress wonderful ? She never forgets anything.' He said this with such admiration that a pang shot through her heart.

Vatikaa passed several sleepless nights, an experience which she had never had before. Even when she fell asleep, she would have ugly dreams in which she was being throttled by the Empress who generally took the shape of a hideous monster or an ugly witch.

She braced herself to decide upon some action after the Empress arrived, but this decision did not help her to get rid of her obsession.

She had inherited the implacability which characterized her father. She racked her brain to find a way out to be rid of the Empress. At first she played with the idea of requesting her father to put a death spell on her, but for the moment he was so much under the influence of Dvaipaayana that he would look upon the request as ridiculous. And if her husband came to know of it, he never would forgive her.

One morning she saw light. She went to Urvi, her father's elder sister. She was a *Srotriya* like herself; she looked after the field in which Maha Atharvan grew the magic herbs; she also knew the *mantra-vidya* relating to women's grievances and ailments, and often helped women to get rid of their rivals. She alone could give her some charm which would eliminate the Empress from her husband's life.

Vatikaa begged her aunt to teach her the appropriate *mantras* to overcome rivals.

The old woman laughed. 'So soon after the marriage ! You seem to be unhappy,' she said.

'No. I am happy, but I want to arm myself against a possible rival. I must be ready to meet the danger if it comes,' said Vatikaa.

Urvi taught her several *mantras* to rid herself of her rival, particularly the one which would make her rival ugly and hateful.

"*I dig up this plant, the most potent,*
By whose power rival women are overcome
And the husband's love strengthened.
"*O thou plant with erect leaves, lovely as you are,*
Do thou, inspired by the Gods, full of might,
Drive away my rival, make my husband mine——
Alone............."

The concluding part of the *mantra* was :

"*The magic plant is powerful,*
I am more powerful,
Superior to superior women,
Now my rival shall be inferior to those that are inferior !
O my lord, I have placed the over-powering herbs upon thee,
May thy mind run after me as a calf after the cow, as water along its course !..................."

Then Vatikaa begged Urvi to show her the magic plant, without which the *mantras* would be useless.

The old woman enjoyed the jest of her niece starting life with a *mantra-vidya* to destroy her rival; her niece was spirited, she felt.

She took her to the plant which she called "pata" and taught her the way to make the spell effective.

'Mash it,' she said, 'mix it with milk from a red she-goat and make your rival drink it. Sprinkle the mixture around the bed of your rival. Put leaves of the magic plant under the bed of your rival; put some on his bed too. Continue to recite the *mantras* all the time.'

'Will this *mantra* kill her ?' asked Vatikaa.

'No. It is not a death charm. It may make your husband angry with your rival or she may become evil-natured, but in any case, your husband will come to be alienated from your rival,' replied the old woman.

Now that Vatikaa had mastered the *mantras* and the ways of administering the magic herb, she was ready to face the Empress.

CHAPTER 17

ARRIVALS

THE life of an average Arya family would revolve round the sacred fire. There were three great sacrificial ceremonials lauded in scripture and tradition—*Aswamedha*, *Rajasooya* and *Vajpeya*, in which the sacred Fire God and "King" Soma were worshipped by elaborate ceremonials, rituals and oblations.

At these ceremonials, which were communal gatherings, Aryas, Nagas and even Nishadhs congregated.

These ceremonials were beyond the means of ordinary kinds, for the host had to provide food to all the visitors, bear the expenses of the ceremonials and give presents to the guests.

The Emperor Bharat, the forefather of the present Emperor Shantanu of Hastinapur, had celebrated a *Rajasooya yajna*.

The news spread like wild fire that the Emperor Shantanu, recently revived by the young ascetic, Bal-Muni, was celebrating the *Vajpeya* at the Field of Wolves as from the eleventh day of the bright half of the month of Chaitra.

Prince Gangeya went personally to invite friendly kings to be present on the occasion.

The news also spread to the *ashrams* that the *Vajpeya* was going to be a unique event. Acharya Vibhuti was going to preside over it as the *Adhvaryu*, the head of the ritualists, and, wonder of wonders, Maha Atharvan, who had forsworn all contacts with the *Trayi Vidya* school of *Srotriyas*, had accepted the position of *Brahmaa* at the *Vajpeya*.

Some felt joy and others shook their heads dolefully at the prospect of a reunion of the *Srotriyas* who accepted the three-fold WORD and those who accepted that it was four-fold.

Srotriyas of different schools came to the Field to discuss with each other the sacrificial homage which should be paid to the leading Acharyas and to secure the blessing of the Bal-Muni who had recently risen to fame.

A few Acharyas of great repute also came to establish the superiority of their *ashrams* in chant, doctrine and ritual; many others were there on account of the fee, which was sure to be lavish.

Kings and chieftains of the surrounding areas arrived, vying with each other in pomp and strength.

Guilds of merchants opened marts. Goat-herds, brought their well-fed goats; they would be needed for the sacrificial ceremonies.

Hunters came with deer-skins, which the kings were sure to present to the *Srotriyas* participating in the sacrifice.

Thousands of villagers came to earn religious merit by making small offerings. Most people brought their womenfolk with them. It was a glorious occasion for women; they would have no domestic tasks to perform, enjoy freedom to sing and dance, and have an opportunity to secure the blessing of the learned *Srotriyas,* who would read their future and promise good husbands to the unmarried and sons to the married.

Dancers, serpent-charmers, monkey-performers and professional wrestlers also came to enliven the occasion.

There were also the uninvited but inevitable guests—the beggars—who had sensed the prospect of sharing the rich feasts which the free kitchen set up by the Minister, Kunik could provide.

As the day of the inauguration came nearer, the representatives of the royal guests arrived to prepare the accommodation for their masters.

Vatikaa was in despair. During the whole day and half of the night, the new arrivals wanted to have a *darshan* from her husband. They would crowd around him, the ailing praying for cures, others seeking his blessing; so would the children when they learnt that he would take his meal only after they were fed.

There was no moment when she could attend to his needs. However, whatever her anxiety for his health she felt immensely proud of having a husband who, of all others, drew the crowds like a magnet.

Maha Atharvan was the only person who had, in his early days, participated in a *Vajpeya.* He knew the details of the ceremonial, and under his guidance, Acharya Gautama and his own principal disciples made detailed preparations for celebrating the ceremonial.

On the seventh day of the bright half of the month of Chaitra, the royal guests began to arrive in chariots encrusted with gold and silver, bringing well-fed horses to participate in the chariot race which was the most exciting part of the *Vajpeya* ceremonial.

Messengers came with the intimation that the great Acharya Vibhuti of the *Trayi Vidya* school, the royal preceptor of the Emperor, was coming the next day, accompanied by his principal disciples. Most of the *Srotriyas* were looking forward with dread to the rival schools—Acharya Vibhuti and Maha Atharvan—so hostile to each other.

Vatikaa was also very uneasy. The situation was so delicate that there might be a break-up of the happy occasion, but she counted without her father's skill in overcoming crises when he was determined to do so.

Maha Atharvan was all for making the *Vajpeya* a success; he wanted Dvaipaayana's entry into the hierarchy of the Munis to be as spectacular as possible; he was as thorough in friendship as he was in hostility. He declared that being a Muni, he would not officiate as a ritualist, but that Shaunak, his principal disciple would be the *Brahmaa* at the ceremony.

Acharya Vibhuti, the royal preceptor, arrived in pomp amidst a crowd of disciples, four of whom were bearing the litter in which he was travelling. He was none too happy. He was expecting a conflict, for he had decidad not to put up with any humiliation at the hands of the uncompromising Maha Atharvan.

As soon as Acharya Vibhuti had climbed down from the litter, Dvaipaayana, Shaunak and the other Acharyas prostrated themselves before him.

'A thousand salutations, Worshipful,' said Dvaipaayana. 'This is Acharya Shaunak, the principal disciple of Maha Atharvan. Maha Atharvan feels that he is too old to stand the strain of acting as *Brahmaa* at the *Vajpeya*; Acharya Shaunak will officiate for him.'

The scowl disappeared from Vibhuti's face. Shaunak was younger than he and his fear of being dominated by the uncompromising Maha Atharvan vanished.

Dvaipaayana added : 'Maha Atharvan is waiting at the foot of the hill to welcome you.' Acharya Vibhuti had not expected this honour, and could not help feeling gratified that things were shaping so well that, as *Adhvaryu*, he should dominate the *Vajpeya*.

While the other Acharyas were offering salutations to Vibhuti, the litter in which the Acharya had come, seemingly empty, stirred into life. An old, wizened face emerged from under the cover, then a fragile body, shrivelled with age; the cover slipped away and Acharya Brahmistha sat up, looking with faded eyes in all directions.

Every one was surprised. The old man looked as if he had come from the other world. In a husky voice, he shouted : 'Dvaipaayana, Dvaipaayana.'

Acharya Vibhuti, by way of introduction, told the Acharyas : 'He is my venerable father, the Most Worshipful Brahmistha.'

Dvaipaayana whispered to Sumantu : 'Run fast and bring your father. Tell him that the worshipful Brahmistha has come and everyone would be happy if he came over to receive him.'

Then he went over to the litter and prostrated himself before Brahmistha, who patted him on the head. After a little fumbling, he caught hold of the ear of Dvaipaayana and in what he thought was a whisper—but sufficiently loud for those who were near Dvaipaayana to hear—said : 'Where is your wife ? Call her.'

Dvaipaayana asked Paila to bring Vatikaa who was among the women standing a little way away.

In the meantime the other Acharyas saluted Brahmistha.

Paila brought Vatikaa, trembling with fright at being publicly exhibited, up to the litter. She prostrated herself before Brahmistha, who patted her on the back and asked : 'Are you beautiful ?'

All those who heard the question could not repress their laughter. Vatikaa, blushing, looked down without giving any reply.

The old man continued : 'Are you a *Srotriya* ?'

'Yes, worship-worthy Master,' replied Vatikaa.

'I warn you, Dvaipaayana's wife, not to fail to behave as a wife should. Women *Srotriyas* do not make good wives; they are filled with pride.'

There was irrepressible laughter and Vatikaa felt as if she would fall to the ground out of sheer shame.

'Now give me your hand, Dvaipaayana,' said Brahmistha. 'I want to get out of the litter.'

Dvaipaayana practically lifted the old Acharya out of the litter and supported him till his tottering legs could grow steady. Even then Brahmistha could stand only by throwing an arm round Dvaipaayana's.

Vibhuti felt that his father had stolen people's attention from him, but he was helpless. And Shaunak and Gautama, as the leading Acharyas were scrupulously respectful to him.

In the meantime, the people standing there parted to allow Maha Atharvan's litter to be brought up to where Brahmistha was standing. Dvaipaayana assisted him in taking a few steps towards the litter. Everybody waited anxiously to see how these two old giants would greet each other.

Maha Atharvan would not let anything come in the way of making the *Vajpeya* a success. Brahmistha was his old enemy, but an older *Srotriyo*. So without the least hesitation, he observed the code of behaviour sanctified by the ages: he bent down and touched the feet of Brahmistha.

Everybody breathed a sigh of relief. Brahmistha caught hold of Maha Atharvan's hand; he was also at his best. He said: 'Jaabaali, I was one of those who drove you out of Dharmakshetra. Today you are here to welcome me to Dharmakshetra again. The gods have kept us alive to see this great re-union.'

Maha Atharvan laughed. 'Times have certainly changed. I never dreamt that I would give my daughter in marriage to the great-grandson of the venerable Maha Muni Vasistha.'

The next day Prince Gangeya arrived in a chariot drawn by four horses. Well-built and tall, with a dignified mien and brilliant eyes, he has a born ruler of men. He stopped the chariot, jumped to the ground with the agility of a youth, touched the feet of Acharyas Vibhuti, Gautama, Shaunak and Dvaipaayana, and folded his hands to the rest.

The people who had gathered to welcome him formed themselves into a procession to take him to the royal camp. Before the procession started, Gangeya called Dvaipaayana: 'You have a surprise for us. Where is your wife ?'

Dvaipaayana pointed to Vatikaa.

Gangeya paused near Vatikaa, looked at her with a smile and said: 'See that your husband does not outdo you in learning'.

The second chariot brought Chitrangada and Vichitraveerya, the former himself driving the chariot. They climbed down and saluted all the Acharyas.

Two days before the *Vajpeya* was due to be inaugurated, the Emperor and the Empress arrived on a caparisoned and gaily-painted elephant, with a large entourage of bowmen and attendants. To minimise the strain for the Emperor and to allow him to travel lying down, they had journey by slow stages in a special litter shaped like a howdah. The elephant kneeled down and the litter was lifted from his back. The Emperor, helped by the Empress and Prince Gangeya, stepped to the ground.

Vatikaa had eyes only for the Empress. When she saw Satyavati, she felt as if she would faint. She had a slender figure, a honey dark face glowing with youth, magnificent eyes, graceful limbs decked in gold and diamonds, and a glamorous presence.

When she stepped out of the litter Dvaipaayana turned towards her. There was boyish smile on his face; the Empress smiled at him with her eyes aglow with pride and adoration. When she bent down before Dvaipaayana to touch his feet, as formal decorum required, her face was lit by a mocking smile; evidently she thought that the salutation was something to laugh about.

The Empress was dangerously beautiful, and very seductive and she behaved in an unwomanly manner by smiling at her husband. Vatikaa thought she had no chance against this rival.

Dvaipaayana and the Acharya, led by Vibhuti, Gautama and Shaunak showered blessings and flowers on the Emperor and the Empress. Conchs were blown and the drums sounded a hearty welcome. The kings folded their hands and touched their feet.

When Vatikaa was introduced to the Empress she placed an affectionate hand on her and patted her on the back. She looked for a few moments carefully at her as if appraising her worth.

'You have stolen Dvaipaayana from all of us, ' said the Empress with a charming laugh and added: 'May you find your happiness by bringing happiness to your husband.'

With so many people looking on, Vatikaa suppressed her inclination to respond by a cutting remark which came to her lips. But one thing was clear: there was some understanding between the glamorous Empress and her husband; what it was, she could not say. However, she was glad that she had decided to put a spell on her.

Soon the people who had come there to greet the Emperor formed themselves into a procession, and with the Emperor and the Empress, carried in the litter leading, it proceeded to the sacred grounds where the *Vajpeya* was to be held, the womenfolk with pots on their heads singing songs of welcome.

CHAPTER 18

THE MAGIC CIRCLE

VATIKAA was lost in admiration at the way her husband was working to make the ceremonial a success.

The head ritualists—Acharya Vibhuti as the *Adhvaryu*, Acharya Gautama as the *Hota*, Acharya Devayaana as the *Udgata* and Acharya Shaunak as the *Brahmaa*— were busy the whole day in making preparations for the *Vajpeya*.

"Seventeen" was the mystic number which invested the *Vajpeya* with miraculous sanctity.

Seventeen *vedis* (altars) were set up, the central one being the largest, where the sacred fire *Agni*, the Fire God, was to be worshipped, invoked by the head ritualists; each had its own ritualist.

The ritualists were selected to chant seventeen *Mantras*, seventeen *Stotras* (hymns of praise), and seventeen *Shastras* (learned texts). Seventeen goats were also selected, perfect in shape and colour, to be offered to *Agni*, the Fire God.

With due ceremony, a *Yupa* was constructed, a sacrificial post for the use of the Emperor and the Empress in climbing upwards towards divinity; it was seventeen cubits high, and girdled with seventeen pieces of cloth.

The ceremony began early in the morning when the Emperor and the Empress arrived at the site and welcomed "King" Soma, the sacred plant, brought from the Himalayas in a cart drawn by eight white bullocks with their horns pasted with gold leaves. The "King" was received by the Emperor and handed over to the *Adhvaryu*, his representative.

The *Adhvaryu*, with appropriate chants, handed over the " King" to the *Hota*. The plant was then crushed and the juice extracted from it was placed in seventeen vessels. Other juices were also extracted from appropriate plants and kept in seventeen other vessels.

The Emperor as the sacrificer and his consort wore seventeen chains of gold each and distributed seventeen chains to each of the four head ritualists and one to each of the other ritualists.

Seventeen cows were presented to each of the head ritualists.

With a due recital of the *mantras*, the sacrificial fire was lit on all the seventeen *vedis* (altars).

The juice of the sacred "King" Soma was offered to the Gods in seventeen vessels, with hundreds of *Srotriyas* chanting the appropriate hymns.

Vatikaa had eyes only for her husband and the Empress. He was always smiling, encouraging, taking part in the ceremony; the crowds, however, would not let him be, for they followed him wherever he went. Children, who were anxiously waiting to be fed, were always clamouring for him, and women with their children came to him to receive his blessing. It was difficult for the Minister's attendants to keep him unharmed by the frantic for his *darshan*.

At first Vatikaa had not liked her husband's idea of sheering away from any official position; he should have been, she thought, the *Adhvaryu*. But, in spite of his youth, he had been acknowledged by universal acclaim, not merely as the son and disciple of the great Muni Paraashara, but as a Muni in his own right. This made her happy and proud.

Throughout the seventeen days of the Dharmakshetra ceremonies the husband was unable to be with his wife. She had therefore no opportunity to meet him by herself, except for a few moments when he returned to their hut at night, dead exhausted.

She had no reason to complain about her husband; evey time their eyes met, he exchanged smiles with her. However, she could not help watching the Empress's behaviour towards her husband. In their turn, whenever they met each other, they exchanged glances in which she read mutual understanding.

The Empress was wicked, she thought from the way she smiled every time her eyes met Vatikaa's, as if she was her private property. The smile was hypocritical, Vatikaa concluded; a deception practised on her; or worse, a smile of triumph for having captured the affections of her husband.

During the twelve years of *Brahmacharya*, Vatikaa had exercised strict self-restraint in matters of sex; that was the pivotal discipline. However, when she saw Dvaipaayana, the gates of her heart were opened and a flood of surging emotion overwhelmed her. Now when she felt that someone else had stolen her husband's heart, she was gripped by maddening jealousy. The fascinating Empress must be removed from her path, her heart insisted.

On the sixteenth day of the ceremonial the thousands of people who had gathered in the Field stood in the sun for *ghatikas* to see the race, the most exciting part of the ceremonial.

A wheel with seventeen spokes—the symbol of the sacrificer's overlordship—was tied to the sacrificial post.

On the left side of the post sat seventeen drummers whose duty was to play the drums seventeen times during the day.

The race-track was seventeen arrow-flights in length.

To the Aryas, the horse was a divinity, a descendant of the divine horse, Dadhikravas, lauded in the WORD, a living symbol of strength and vitality. In war, the four-horse-chariot of the Aryas provided a terrific engine of destruction, bringing victory. In peace, chariot races were the favourite sport of the Aryas.

Looking after and training horses were among the accomplishments of the Kshatriyas. Most of the kings maintained a stud-farm of their own. The military hierarchy among the Kshatriyas of *Rathi*, *Maharathi* and *Atirathi* was based on their skill and mastery in chariot driving.

On this occasion, there were seventeen chariots, sixteen of which were drawn by four stallions each. The seventeenth chariot in which the Emperor and the Empress were to ride, had only three powerful stallions harnessed to the yoke; the fourth, which was a very fiery one, was not yoked, and the charioteer had to see that, though unyoked, he would course together with the other three stallions, directed only by a separate set of reins. This fourth stallion was duly worshipped as divine.

In view of the Emperor's health, the head ritualist had decided that Prince Gangeya should drive the chariot in the race.

Maha Atharvan and Dvaipaayana, both enjoying the status of *Munis*, were standing at the starting-point, besides the head ritualists, when the Emperor approached the chariot on unsteady legs. Gangeya stepped forward to help his father mount the chariot.

Maha Atharvan and Dvaipaayana exchanged meaningful glances; the former nodded assent to the latter's mute request.

Dvaipaayana, as Gangeya stepped forward to help the Emperor, requested the Prince by a polite gesture to step aside and stood in front of the Emperor, his body taut, his eyes fixed on the Emperor in a steady gaze as if he was transmitting mysterious streams of vitality. 'Noble lord', he told the Emperor with authority, 'you can drive the chariot yourself.'

'I am afraid I cannot,' said the Emperor with a helpless smile.

'No, you can,' repeated Dvaipaayana and held the Emperor's eyes by his compelling glance. As he repeated—'Yes, you can, noble Emperor,' the Emperor fixed his gaze on Dvaipaayana, shivered and cast a helpless glance towards the others.

'You can, I assure you,' repeated Dvaipaayana and extended a hand to the Emperor to help him mount the chariot.

The Emperor smiled at Dvaipaayana, and as he caught hold of his hand, a change came over him. His unsteady legs became firm. Squaring his shoulders, he mounted the chariot himself to the amazement of all the Acharyas standing there.

Dvaipaayana then arrested Gangeya's movement to climb the chariot by a polite gesture. 'Noble Gangeya, the Emperor will drive the chariot himself.'

The Emperor, who had once been a master-charioteer, gathered the reins of the yoked horses in his left hand and those of the unyoked horse in the other, which also held the whip.

Acharya Vibhuti turned to the Empress. 'Noble Empress, Vatikaa, the daughter of Maha Atharvan, will help you mount the chariot.'

Vatikaa would have sooner bitten her nose off, but there was no disregarding the request. She offered a hand to the Empress. The Empress took hold of her hand, gave her cheek a fond pat and mounted the chariot with sprightly steps.

Vatikaa saw her husband standing near the chariot, ready to help the Empress, should she stumble while mouting the chariot. 'Oh, the wicked woman—the whisper of her imagination became a deafening roar. She trembled with rage. 'I must act and act now.'

Satyavati, the Empress stood by her husband in the chariot, straight-up with a triumphant look in her eyes.

Seventeen drums were sounded. The race began. Sixty-eight horses of the finest breed raced towards the goal to the vociferous delight of every one. Children jumped for joy.

While every one in the huge crowd was watching the race with breathless interest, Vatikaa quietly disappeared.

When one of the horses drawing a chariot became unruly, the chariot toppled over and the charioteer was thrown from it. This led to tremendous excitement.

The horses of two other teams attacked one another with murderous fury. They reared, snorted, tried to bite each other. The chariots were roughly shaken and the kings driving them, barely escaped with their lives. The attendants who ran to the spot could only suppress this equine riot with great difficulty.

Once an *atirathi* of great power, the Emperor found his racing spirit reviving. The unyoked stallion, a powerful and beautiful animal, the finest product of the Emperor's stud-farm, sensed that the reins were now held by a master and would not brook any other horse to outdistance him. He shook his mane; his nostrils quivered; he snorted. Setting the pace of the three yoked horses, he soon outstripped the other chariots. The Emperor won the race.

'*Sadhu*, *sadhu*,' shouted all who were watching the race.

After the race was won and offerings were made to the sacred fire, there was a community dinner.

When the royal family retired to the camp, the Empress said: 'Lord, today you were splendid.'

'Thanks to your son—I felt that I was twenty years younger'.

'....and yours too,' reminded the Empress.

When he was ready to retire, she arranged the bed-clothes round him, folded her hands in salutation and saw that the oil lamps which lighted the room were extinguished. With a nod to the attending *mull*, she went into the adjoining room, where she was to sleep.

Her maids removed the ornaments and diadem and helped her to change from the heavy formal dress that she wore into a homely skirt and a scarf loosely tied over her breasts. She permitted the maids to retire, leaving only Daavi, her senior maid, whose duty it was to sleep on the door-step of the room.

She approached the bed and stood still. 'Daavi, bring the lamp,' she said. Daavi brought the oil lamp and held it so that the Empress could examine what had caught her attention.

There was a circle drawn around her bed in some milky substance. For a moment, the Empress was taken aback and tried to discover the significance of this magic circle.

Without risking the danger of crossing into it, she picked up the bear-skins from her bed and shook them. Four or five small leaves of a plant fell to the ground. She picked them up and examined them carefully; they were the leaves of some magic herb. Someone was trying to harm her by sorcery. Who could have done this? What could be the object of putting this spell on her? The spirit of triumph which had made her happy the whole day, vanished.

'Daavi, who was in charge of this hut during the day?' asked the Empress.

Daavi looked penitent. 'I allowed the attendants to go and see the race,' she replied.

'Were you here for the whole time?'

Daavi folded her hands. 'Forgive me. When I saw that the august mistress was going to ride in the chariot, I could not resist the temptation of going to see the race.'

'Did you see the magic circle?' asked the Empress.

'I had placed the bear-skins in the sun and just before leaving, I brought them inside and spread them on the bed. The magic circle was not there when I left.'

'Daavi, prepare my bed on the ground. I will not sleep in this magic circle,' said the Empress.

She was miserable. Who could this enemy be? Since she first came to Hastinapur, she had been trying to be friendly to all, obliging every one, never losing her temper. The very idea that she had implacable enemies made her unhappy.

She hastily sat down and began thinking about the person who bore her a grudge. 'I have made no enemies. I have made no one unhappy, never harmed anyone. I have been a devoted and loyal wife to the Emperor, an affectionate mother to Gangeya, gracious to the Kuru chiefs, a generous mistress, solicitous about the welfare of the attendants, as well as the people of Hastinapur. If I only knew his name, I would seek his forgiveness,' she said to herself.

She called Daavi, who was standing at a distance and whispered: 'Daavi, go to the Bal-Muni. Tell him about the sorcery which was being practised on me. Show him these leaves and tell him to find cut the person who is bent on harming me. Ask him to see me tomorrow, early in the morning. I sense some conspiracy.'

CHAPTER 19

THE ASCENT TO HEAVEN

IN DVAIPAAYANA'S hut, Vatikaa retired to the room in which she slept, away from her husband.

Dvaipaayana also went to his bed of deer-skins. Before lying down, he took the deer-skin and as usual shook it. Four leaves dropped from it. He picked them up and brought them near the solitary oil lamp which dimly lit the room.

He observed them closely and found that they were the leaves of the magic herb *pata*. He was taken aback. This was the work of some Atharvan who was adept in *Yatu Vidya* (sorcery).

He already knew from his father that *pata* leaves had the magic power, when applied with appropriate *mantras*, to make an enemy ugly or wicked. Who could have placed them in his bed, he wondered.

Maha Atharvan was out of the question; he was doing his best to raise his position in the world of the *Munis*. Shaunak and Sumantu were very friendly to him. There must be some other Atharvan jealous of his importance who wanted to harm him.

As he sat thinking over this matter, he was surprised to see Daavi coming with a message from the Empress. 'Venerable *Muni*, my august mistress has sent a message: When she retired for the night, she found a magic circle round her bed, made of some milky substance and found these leaves on her bed.'

Dvaipaayana took the leaves from her hand.

'My august mistress,' continued Daavi, 'feels that there is a conspiracy against her.'

Dvaipaayana identified the leaves as those of the magic herb *pata*. 'Daavi, go and tell your august mistress that I will see her in the morning,' he told the attendant.

After Daavi left, Dvaipaayana was lost in thought. There was no doubt about it. The person who was trying to work the spell on him also wished to work it on the Empress, rather more to harm her than him, for if she had stepped into the magic circle, she would have immediately attracted the spell.

Who could it be? And the person who tried to work this spell wanted a corresponding change in him also. He thought of one person after another. It could not be Maha Atharvan. It could not be Shaunak. And what was the connection between him and the Empress that led to this wicked act?

Suddenly, as if in a flash, he saw who had made this spell:

it was Vatikaa. From the time the Empress had arrived in Dharmakshetra, he found that Vatikaa had withdrawn into herself; she did not like to be with the Empress, and every time the Empress tried to make friends with her, her response, though to all outward appearances courteous, was lacking in warmth.

He recollected how, while mounting the chariot, the Empress had laid a friendly hand on Vatikaa, though she did not need her help, and when she affectionately patted her on the cheek, she had turned pale and shivered.

Once on this track, Dvaipaayana found other occasions when Vatikaa had resisted friendly overtures by the Empress.

A thought struck him. In his presence, the Empress behaved without formality, exactly as if they were at Kalpi. She had been brought up to the unsophisticated life of the fisher-folk; she therefore indulged in freedoms which no Arya princess would be guilty of. Though this made her immensely popular with the ordinary people, it only attracted the dislike of the haughty Kuru chiefs. What was natural to her was offensive in the eyes of these proud people.

He saw light. Mother was glamorous. Her smile was fascinating. Anyone who approached her was lost in admiration of her ways, though he might disapprove of the easy familiarity with which she dealt with people.

This was, beyond doubt, Vatikaa's work; she must have been led by jealousy, for the Empress openly showed her affection for him.

The *pata* leaves which were found on the bed of the Empress and his own bed, must have come from the garden of magic herbs maintained by Maha Atharvan.

It was stupid of Vatikaa to believe that he had an unjustified fondness for the Empress or that the Empress was making love to him. He grew angry. For a flitting moment a desire to punish her came to his mind. Then he smiled. Poor Vatikaa was so much in love with him that she had lost her balance of mind.

He had no right to be angry with her; it was his fault for not explaining to her this strange relationship between an august Empress and an ascetic *Muni*. It was indeed fortunate that the Empress had not stepped into the magic circle and had removed the leaves from the bed.

What was to be done to save the Empress from coming to any harm and to prevent the exposure of Vatikaa's foolish action?

If Vatikaa discovered that he had traced the witchcraft, she would be miserable. If he charged her with resorting to sorcery against the Empress, she might confess her guilt or disown it, but she would not forgive either the Empress or him. Anyway, even if she came to know that she had been found guilty of working sorcery on the Empress and himself, the guilt would oppress her all her life.

He thought and thought. He was in a difficult situation. He could not tell the Empress who had tried to lay the spell on her. If he told her, she would harbour a grievance against Vatikaa, or anyway look down upon her.

Vatikaa was entitled to his protection. He must not hurt her dignity nor expose her folly. Then what was the way?

His heart went out to the poor girl, who, during the last seventeen days of the ceremonial, had been torn by jealousy out of love for him. He must not let her down nor must this incident come in the way of the affectionate relationship which he wanted to establish between the Empress and Vatikaa.

Dvaipaayana got up and tapped at the door which separated his room from the room occupied by Vatikaa. Immediately Vatikaa asked: 'Is it you, lord? Do you want me?'

'Yes, Jaabaaley*aa*, something unusual has happened. I want your advice', replied Dvaipaayana.

Vatikaa immediately got up, adjusted her clothes and came into the room. She was under a nervous strain, for, if her husband had discovered that she had put a spell on the Empress and him, he would never forgive her.

'Sit down, Jaabaaley*aa*. Why do you stand?' asked Dvaipaayana in a very affectionate tone.

Vatikaa sat in front of him, expecting an explosion, which however never came.

'Something strange has happened', said Dvaipaayana. 'I want your assistance in solving this mystery.'

'What is it, lord?' asked Vatikaa. The moment she dreaded had come.

'Someone drew a magic circle around the bed of the Empress and left some *pata* leaves under her bed. Here are those leaves.'

He made no mention of the leaves found on his bed; that would have made it a personal affair.'

Vatikaa was confused. She dared not look at his face. She knew that he would be angry; perhaps he might abandon her altogether.

Then Dvaipaayana said almost in a whisper: 'I know *pata* leaves; I used to pick them up when I accompanied my father on his journeys on foot. These must be the magic herbs from your father's garden. We would find out who the culprit is. We should take steps to see that no harm comes to the Empress. You can show these leaves to your father, who possibly may be able to throw some light on this mysterious witchcraft.' Vatikaa received the leaves with a trembling hand.

Unable to speak a single word, Vatikaa suppressed her inclination to shout at Dvaipaayana to say that she herself had resorted to sorcery because the facinating Empress was making love to him. But it was impossible to vent her jealous wrath, for her husband placed implicit trust in her.

'You must help me, Jaabaaley*aa*, to find out what this conspiracy is. The same person might harm the Empress in some other way. So, you will have to attend on the Empress to see that no harm comes to her from any *Yatu Vidya*,' said Dvaipaayana.

Vatikaa was again tempted to shout and say: 'I will not do it; I don't want to look at that woman,' but the very affectionate and persuasive way in which Dvaipaayana expressed his confidence in her prevented her from giving vent to her feelings. She looked down and said as if to herself: 'I will.'

'No. That is not enough, Jaabaaley*aa*. Tomorrow morning we shall go to her and I shall ask her to let you be with her all the time.'

'The whole time with her! What am I to do?' she burst out.

'What are you to do, Jaabaali's daughter? You have to protect her from this wicked influence—from *Yatu Vidya* (sorcery). You know the Atharvan *mantra* which eradicates the effects of sorcery. You will, by your *mantra-vidya*, save her from harm.'

Vatikaa could not resist the temptation of saying: 'Why are you so solicitous about the Empress? It is the Emperor who is ill and not the Empress.'

'Jaabaaley*aa*, no married man should neglect his mother and no married woman should come between her husband and his mother—as the venerable Muni Paraashara said,' Dvaipaayana told her.

Vatikaa could not believe her ears. 'Mother! The Empress is not your mother,' she exclaimed.

'She is, Jaabaaley*aa*. She gave me birth; she nursed me in my infancy; she lived only for me. It was for my benefit that she sent me away with my father. That was before the Emperor married her.'

'What was she then?' asked Vatikaa.

'She was a fisher-girl.'

Proud as she was of her descent from the ancient seers—

Bhrigu and Angiras—Vatikaa felt as if she would swoon, but she bit her lips to maintain self-control.

Then Dvaipaayana added: 'I lost sight of her for fifteen years. I met her again when, in order to fulfil the unexpressed wishes of the venerable Maha Atharvan, I went to Hastinapur to meet the Emperor.'

Like a demented person, Vatikaa looked at her husband, and as she felt her head swimming, she put both her hands on her forehead.

'When you come in contact with her, you will see how good, generous and noble she is. Now she is in some danger from an enemy; you must protect her. It would be a cardinal sin to see her harmed,' said Dvaipaayana encouragingly and added: 'She loves me as no woman ever loved her son, and she is dying to find her daughter in you.'

Vatikaa was confused. Tears began to flow from her eyes. 'Oh, the ancient seers, Bhrigu and Angiras! What have I done?' she murmured to herself, as she broke down and lapsed into sobs.

Dvaipaayana got up, brought a jug of water, and put it up to her lips. 'Take this water, Jaabaaleyaa. Now, go to your room and sleep. Early tomorrow morning we shall meet the Empress. She will be happy to find that both her son and his wife are there to protect her.'

Vatikaa spent a sleepless night. She cursed her folly in trying to cast a spell on the Empress, and more especially in doing an injustice to her husband by misreading his character. She was not quite sure whether her husband had observed the *pata* leaves which she had placed on his bed, but she was overcome with gratefulness at the delicate manner in which he had saved her.

The next day was the culmination of the *Vajpeya*, the ceremony called the "Ascent to Heaven."

In the morning, Dvaipaayana and Vatikaa went to the imperial camp. The Empress sent a maid to bring them into the room where the maids were decking her with ornaments.

On seeing Dvaipaayana and Vatikaa, the Empress smiled affectionately and gave them her blessing as they touched her feet. Vatikaa was overwhelmed by the affectionate reception given by the Empress and cursed herself again for having attempted to put a spell on her.

By a gesture, the Empress commanded all the maids, except Daavi, her confidential attendant, to leave the room.

Then she turned to Dvaipaayana and asked in a whisper: 'Krishna, did you find out who put the spell on me?'

'No. I have entrusted the work to Jaabaaley*aa*. She knows all about the spells her father, Maha Atharvan, casts. She is also an Atharvan *Srotriya*, you know. She will be with you all the time to save you from any possible harm,' said Dvaipaayana.

The Empress turned to Vatikaa with a smile. 'Will you?' she asked her anxiously.

Vatikaa nodded assent.

'I am glad that you will be with me the whole day. I feel lost with such a crowd staring at me. Please find out who is conspiring against me,' said the Empress in an earnest voice. 'If I knew who did it, I would ask him how he came to bear ill-will against me and then repair any wrong that I might have done to him. I will ask his forgiveness. I have not harmed anyone, nor intended to do so.'

Tears sprang from Vatikaa's eyes.

'Jaabaaley*aa*,' said the Empress as she patted Vatikaa, 'Krishna'—then she added in a mocking tone—' I am sorry, I made a lapse; I should have said the venerable "Bal-Muni"—is happy that he has a wife like you.'

Vatikaa was so overwhelmed by the generous treatment of the Empress that she could not resist falling at her feet and accosting her as "Mother."

The Empress bent down, lifted her and embraced her. 'I wanted a daughter and the Great God has given me one,' she said.

After the rituals were performed and appropriate *mantras* chanted, the Emperor climbed up the steps of the sacrificial post with the assistance of Acharya Vibhuti. The Empress, with a hand on Vatikaa's, climbed the steps with sprightly grace.

Dvaipaayana was glad to see that Vatikaa was now making up for her distrust of the Empress. She stood at the foot of the staircase, ready to help the Empress if she stumbled.

The Emperor and the Empress went into the room constructed on the top of the sacrificial post, and stayed there till the appropriate *mantras* were chanted. Then they climbed down, led by the *Adhvaryu*, Acharya Vibhuti, amidst thunderous shouts of "Victory to the Best of Bharatas and the Mahadevi."

What was left of the Soma juice was taken by the ritualists; the remaining juices were distributed among the others.

Then the Emperor and the Empress took their bath in perfumed water to the accompaniment of the chants of the *Srotriyas*. They were no longer humans; they were gods, having ascended to heaven in their bodies.

Then they took their seats near the sacrificial fire. A white umbrella—a sign of the imperial status—was unfolded over the heads of the Emperor and the Empress. Everyone, the kings, the chiefs and all the *Srotriyas*, except Maha Atharvan, who was a recognised Muni, came and touched their feet. The congregation lustily shouted: "Victory to the Best of Bharatas."

Dvaipaayana could not help noticing how happy the Empress was, and so was Vatikaa.

The climax of the ceremony was a proclamation of the Emperor's announced by Prince Gangeya:

'The Best of Bharatas has taken a pledge that the power of the Kurus will protect every *ashram* which is the centre of righteous living; every *Srotriya*, living in austere simplicity and dedicated to the WORD; every woman who is loyal to her lord and family; every cow, the mother of plenty—so that *dharma* may prevail.

'The Best of Bharatas has also commanded me to announce that in every way he will help the *Shraut Satra*, the Twelve-year session which the venerable Bal-Muni Dvaipaayana proposes to hold in the Paraashara *ashram*, so that the grace of the Gods and the inspiration of the WORD may descend upon men.'

CHAPTER 20

THE VENERABLE MOTHER IN DISTRESS

THE *Vajpeya* was completely successful. It brought the leading *Srotriyas* together; it raised the stature of the Emperor Shantanu among the kings; it whetted the edge of Arya consciousness which had been blunted during the protracted war. The Field of Wolves was re-invested with the dignity of *Dharmakshetra*, the source of *dharma*.

From the next day, the congregation began to disperse. Acharya Vibhuti wound up the ceremony in an appropriate manner and left for Hastinapur, feeling happy at the thought that the ceremonial had added to his stature as the patriarch of the *Srotriyas*.

The kings and other chiefs who had come to attend the *Vajpeya*, dispersed after paying their respects to Dvaipaayana who had been spontaneously and unanimously accepted as having attained to the status of a *Muni*, an honour generally reserved for a master of learning and *tapas* who possessed miraculous powers.

The Minister, Kunik announced that the free kitchens would be closed after two days, but according to the Emperor's wishes, he had made arrangements to supply foodgrains to the Paraashara *ashram* and also to the Acharyas and their disciples who decided to join the Twelve-year *Shraut Satra*, a ceremonial session dedicated to teaching and learning the WORD.

The goat-herds, foresters, traders and visitors began to disperse after securing the blessing of Dvaipaayana.

When the last flock of the ailing came to offer their parting salutations to Bal-Muni, the situation was surcharged with high emotion. With their arms extended, the ailing clamoured for relief. They besought the Bal-Muni to heal their sickness by his miraculous powers. He disclaimed any such power; it was the power of the WORD, he said, which would come to the rescue, when one acquired complete faith.

As usual, the ailing with the members of their family, women-folk and children, sat round the Bal-Muni, each with a pot of milk in his hand. Bal-Muni dropped the leaf of a magic herb into each pot and uttered appropriate *mantras*.

After they had taken the milk, he went round giving a blessing to each sufferer. He had his own form of blessing: 'Have faith in the WORD and it will cure you.' Then he talked for a few moments with each of the suffering about his personal problems, and about his domestic life, and the condition of his cows; if the sufferer happened to be a woman, he enquired about her daughters and daughters-in-law.

The children were heart-broken at the prospect of parting with him. He had talked to them about his friendship with the fish in the Yamuna and how he could understand their language. One child came forward and asked him: "Won't you teach me the language of the fish?"

He said: "Next time you come here, I will teach you how to talk to the fish. For now, go with your parents."

Then he led them to the entrance of the *ashram*. When the final parting came, every eye was moist, but every heart was full of happiness, for he had given them the most precious of gifts—hope.

Nevertheless, it was greatly against their will that they parted from him.

The visiting *Srotriyas* also left, after offering salutations to Bal-Muni. So did such of the Acharyas as were anxious to return to their respective Paraashara *ashrams* on the banks of Yamuna. They, however, extracted a promise from him that after the Twelve-year *Shraut Satra* was over, he would visit their *ashrams* in the same way as the venerable Paraashara Muni used to do.

As they were leaving, Dvaipaayana gave them a last warning: 'The WORD would promote righteous living only if the *Srotriyas* lived in *tapas*, austere poverty and rigorous self-discipline. Without *tapas*, there could be no achievement.'

Then he prayed :

> *Grant us, O Gods, protection——*
> *By protection, give us zest to live;*
> *By such a zest, mutual understanding;*
> *By such an understanding, the knowledge of truth;*
> *By such knowledge, the will to live righteously,*
> *By such a will, the love of all things;*
> *And by such love, faith in the WORD*
> *That reveals* Rita, *the Order which*
> *upholds the Universe.*

Dvaipaayana, Gautama, Paila and Sumantu organised the life of the giant *ashram*, which, though presided over by Gautama as the head of the Paraashara *Gotra*, was in fact guided by Bal-Muni.

He appointed Paila in charge of *Rik*; Gautama in charge of *Sama*; Sumantu in charge of the *Atharvan* lore.

A number of young *Srotriyas*, attracted by his learning and personality, had decided to join the *ashram*; the task of bringing their learning and self-discipline to the requisite standard also added to his responsibility.

Dvaipaayana saw to it that *Dharmakshetra* assumed the shape which his father would have loved to give it.

When the morning star rose, he would go to the *ashram* of Maha Atharvan to master the Atharvana lore. On his return, he would attend to the ailing and distribute food to the children. After the midday meal, he would join the Acharyas to give a final touch to the recitation of the WORD.

Soma Yaag, a sacrificial ceremonial, in which the worship of 'King' Soma, the miraculous plant, was predominant, was also performed now and again to standardize the ceremonials.

The womenfolk of the *ashrams* milked the cows, ground corn, prepared food, looked after the children, observed the vow of strict loyalty to their husbands and sang songs.

Boys, when they attained the age of eight, were invested with the sacred thread and as *Brahmacharis* began to master the WORD. The new Acharyas, when they became competent, were sent out to found *ashrams* of their own and spread the message of righteous living, through *tapas*.

In the meantime, affairs at Hastinapur were getting complicated.

Exactly 17 months after the *Vajpeya*, the Emperor Shantanu departed for the Land of his Forefathers.

Dvaipaayana often thought of his mother and visited Hastinapur now and again, even though he had to perform expiatory rituals on his return before rejoining the *Shraut Satra*.

He was glad to see that Prince Gangeya was taking prompt action to see that the *ashrams* in the realm were protected from *rakshasas*, bandits and wild beasts, that the *Srotriyas* and loyal women were respected and that vows were honoured as living divinities.

After the mourning period was over, Chitrangada was duly installed as Emperor, but a few months later, he lost his life in a border incident.

The death of Chitrangada came as a bitter blow to the Empress Satyavati who was now universally called the venerable Mother and it took some time before she came back to her normal self.

Vichitraveerya was installed as Emperor with due ceremony, but an atmosphere of gloom enveloped Hastinapur. Luckily, Gangeya's firm hand was there to guide the policy of the State and his leadership enhanced the military strength of the Kurus.

During this hectic period, Vatikaa often had to stay at Hastinapur with the venerable Mother, leaving Shuka, her infant son, with Urvi, her father's sister. Every few weeks she came to *Dharmakshetra* and kept her husband in touch with affairs in Hastinapur.

The venerable Mother was having distressing time. She continued to feel that the shadow of a great calamity was about to fall on her, on Hastinapur and on the Kurus.

This distress was not unjustified. Vichitraveerya's health was very poor and if something happened to him, the royal line of the Bharatas would be extinct and the power of the Kurus would collapse, she felt.

That Bal-Muni was her son by Muni Paraashara had come to be whispered from mouth to mouth. However, it did not affect the respect in which he and the venerable Mother were held.

Satyavati was loved for her goodness, generosity and her readiness to give help to all who sought it. Dvaipaayana was held in veneration for his vast learning and mastery of the WORD; for his concern for the welfare of all; for the healing touch which he gave to the ailing; for his vow of feeding the children; and above all, for his miraculous power, which had revived the Emperor Shantanu.

Vichitra was weak in health, not much of an expert in arms and temperamental in dealing with men. Whispers had gone round the royal houses about his maternal ancestry; no king was, therefore, willing to offer his daughter to him.

The venerable Mother found the situation very disheartening. Prince Gangeya, however, discovered a solution.

The King of Kashi was holding a *Swayamvara* for his three daughters, Ambaa, Ambikaa, and Ambalikaa, to select a proper husband for each. Prince Gangeya, with a strong contingent of Kuru warriors, descended upon the *Swayamvara* and kidnapped the three princesses—by no means an unusual event—inflicting a defeat on the King of Kashi and on the other Princes who had hoped to win the hand of one or other of the Kashi Princesses.

This was a triumph for Kuru power, no doubt, but Satyavati had lost her self-confidence, since she realised that the prestige of the royal house which she had helped in building up by years of patient effort, had suffered.

Vatikaa who had come to *Dharmakshetra* went to Hastinapur to attend the wedding of Vichitra; Dvaipaayana could not, as his attendance at the *Shraut Satra* was essential.

A few weeks later, when Dvaipaayana and the principal Acharyas were reciting the *mantras* in the Paraashara *ashram*, they heard the clattering of wheels and hoof-beats of horses. The recital was stopped. Something unexpected had happened.

As soon as the first chariot arrived at the entrance of the *ashram*, Kaundinya, a Minister, climbed out of it and with hurried steps came to where Dvaipaayana was sitting.

The Minister announced that the venerable Mother had come. Dvaipaayana's heart missed a beat as he hastened towards the entrance of the *ashram*, with the other Acharyas following.

The deer-skin curtains of the third chariot were lifted by the attendants. Daavi got out of the chariot first and held out a hand; the venerable Mother took it and stepped down from the chariot. Dvaipaayana's heart almost sank; only dire calamity could have led his mother to come to *Dharmakshetra* in such unceremonious haste. He prostrated himself before his mother, who patted him on the back by way of a blessing.

Satyavati was as beautiful in sorrow as she was in triumph; as graceful in unadorned simplicity as when she wore the royal diadem; as impressive—perhaps more—in the black scarf which enveloped her from neck to heel than when she wore a gem-studded skirt and scarf. Her sprightliness was now replaced by the dignity of mature womanhood. The shadow of a great sorrow was upon her.

After the *Srotriyas* had blessed her, Dvaipaayana cleared the way and led her to his hut, requesting Paila to carry on with the recitals. He also asked one of the disciples to prepare for her the hut in which the Emperor and Empress had lived during the *Vajpeya* and bring her a cup of buttermilk.

At a gesture from the Empress, all her attendants went out except Daavi. Then she sat down on a deer-skin which Dvaipaayana had spread out for her.

'Mother, where is the daughter of Jaabaali?' Dvaipaayana asked impatiently.

'I sent her with Ambaa.'

Suddenly Satyavati burst into tears, her lips quivering. 'Krishna, misfortune, like a thunderbolt, has struck us down,' she said.

'A thunderbolt!' exclaimed Dvaipaayana.

'It has fallen upon me, Gangeya, our family, the Kurus and in a way upon *dharma* itself.' Her words were interrupted by sobs.

'What is it?' Dvaipaayana asked in surprise. 'I thought you were happy after the Kashi Princesses were married to Vichitraveerya'.

'No, the marriage episode was a ghastly affair,' the Empress broke down again as convulsive sobs shook her frame.

CHAPTER 21

THE MASTER ON THE SCENE

'Now take a little buttermilk,' Dvaipaayana offered the small clay jug of buttermilk to his mother.

After she regained her composure, Satyavati said: 'What was expected did not materialise. Only two of the three Princesses were married to Vichitraveerya.'

'Why, what was the matter with the third ?' Dvaipaayana asked.

'Ambaa, the eldest, declined to marry Vichitra. She said that with her father's consent, she had pledged herself to King Shalva; she was going to select him at the open *Swayamvara*, when Gangeya came, forcibly kidnapped her and ruined her life.'

The Empress wiped her tears, sipped a little of the buttermilk and added: 'Gangeya was as noble-hearted as ever. He admitted the propriety of Ambaa's decision, and sent her to Shalva as if she were a Kuru Princess. The Minister, Kunik, accompanied her with wedding presents for the bridegroom. At my request Vatikaa also went with her.'

'What happened to the Princess ?' Dvaipaayana interrupted.

The venerable Mother laid a hand on her forehead. 'Oh Gods !' she exclaimed; she looked the very image of despair. 'Shalva declined to wed Ambaa. He had been defeated, he said, by Gangeya at the *swayamvara* in open battle and it would be unbefitting for a *kshatriya* to accept her as a gift from the man who had won her in the battle.'

'What followed on that ?'

'Then one misfortune followed another,' said the Mother. After a pause she continued: 'Ambaa returned to Hastinapur in mighty rage, upbraided Gangeya for having ruined her life and insisted upon his marrying her for the wrong he had done her.'

'Oh, Gods !' Dvaipaayana exclaimed.

'Gangeya, in spite of the abuses which she hurled at him and me, explained to her that he had taken a pledge not to marry and begged Ambaa to marry Vichitra or to find a proper suitor.'

Mother wiped her tears and continued: 'I also begged of her to live with me in Hastinapur as my daughter. She would be treated, I assured her, with all the dignity and comfort of a Kuru Princess and would be married to a Prince of her choice.'

'She declined ?'

'She was not a woman but a raging volcano, emitting fiery words at Gangeya and me.'

The Mother paused for a while and then continued : 'She demanded that she should be sent to her maternal grandfather, Hotra Vahana, who had retired to the Himalayas. She also announced her resolve that she would have Gangeya marry her or see him killed.'

'What a woman !' exclaimed Dvaipaayana and asked : 'Did you comply with her demand ?'

The venerable Mother heaved a deep sigh and continued : 'There was no other alternative.'

'Did the Minister, Kunik, and Jaabaaley*aa* (Vatikaa) also go with her ?' asked Dvaipaayana.

The Mother replied : 'Yes. The last message that I received from Vatikaa was that they were staying at the *ashram* of Rishi Shaikhavatya, and that grandfather Hotra Vahana also had arrived there. Both were trying their best to persuade her to give up her resolve.'

'When do you expect Jaabaaley*aa* to return ?'

'Very shortly, but in the meantime the situation became infinitely worse,' said his Mother. She wiped the tears which welled from her eyes.

'Last week, Akrutvarna, the disciple of the mighty Parashurama, came to Hastinapur with the Master's message. It seems he arrived at the *ashram* and was prevailed upon by Ambaa to intervene. You know that Gangeya was his disciple,' said his Mother.

'What was the Master's message?'

'The message was—I will quote the very words—"I am coming to the *ashram* of Maha Atharvan Jaabaali, two days after the dark moonless night. Meet me there, ready to marry Ambaa whose life you have ruined or to fight with me".' The Mother broke down.

'Does the noble Prince Gangeya realise the meaning of the message?' asked Dvaipaayana. There was anxiety in his voice.

'The significance of the message is very clear: either Gangeya breaks his vow to remain unmarried, or offers his life in a fight with his *guru*. Krishna, either way, Hastinapur is doomed.' Tears again sprang up in her eyes as she was unable to speak further. She placed her hands over her forehead in despair.

'You need not tell me more, Mother,' said Dvaipaayana. 'I know that if Prince Gangeya leaves for the Land of the Forefathers, civil war will destroy the Kurus. Vichitra, with his weak health and vacillating behaviour, will not be able to control the situation by himself.'

'The future is very dark,' said his Mother. 'The edifice of *dharma* which we were building up will be demolished.' She wiped her tears, and paused for a moment, staring vacantly.

Then she continued: 'Krishna, sometimes I wish I had stayed at Kalpi as a fisher-woman and brought you up myself. We would have worshipped Mother Yamuna and lived happily.'

Dvaipaayana saw that she was seeing pictures of how they had lived at Kalpi. Then she smiled a little: 'Do you remember, Krishna, how I taught you to dive into the river? Out of fear, you wouldn't do it of your own free will. So I played a trick on you; I sank into the waters pretending that I was drowning. You lost your fear and dived to rescue me.'

Dvaipaayana's face assumed its boyish smile and he said: 'Is that what you are doing now—pretending to be drowned so that I can dive and rescue you?'

Mother and son laughed. In a moment, however, they came back to tragic realities.

Dvaipaayana spoke thoughtfully: 'I also see that with noble Gangeya gone, the *kshatra tej*—the radiance of valour—will never be harnessed to *brahma tej*—the radiance of the spirit.' After a pause he asked: 'When is Prince Gangeya coming here?'

'Prince Gangeya will be coming here in three days' time. He remained behind to make arrangements in case he did not return. He has grown silent and stern. If Gangeya ceases to be, the power of Hastinapur will crumble.'

Both Mother and son were silent.

Then Dvaipaayana looked up.

'Don't you worry, Mother. Leave it to the God Surya. Things will just happen, not as we wish, but as He wills.'

Three days later Prince Gangeya arrived in his war chariot accompanied by a few Kuru *Maharathis* in their own chariots. At the entrance of the Paraashara *ashram*, Dvaipaayana received the Prince ceremoniously, and the Prince, in turn, offered him salutations.

Gangeya's face was grim, his lips firm set, his eyes stern.

Dvaipaayana led him to the hut prepared for him. After removing his arms, he accompanied Dvaipaayana to pay his respects to the Mother.

After his salutation, he at once plunged into the matter which was oppressing them.

'Bal-Muni, has Mother told you everything about the crisis?'

'Yes,' Dvaipaayana replied briefly. 'What do you propose to do?'

Gāngeya cleared his throat and said: 'My way is clear. I will not break my pledge not to marry. I will not break my pledge to obey my *guru*'.

'Mother is worried as to what would happen if you were not there to lead the Kurus,' said Dvaipaayana.

'If I break my pledge, I will be worse than dead,' said Gangeya. 'And once the Master gives a mandate, you cannot disobey and live.'

'Gangeya......' began the Mother, but she could not continue, as her voice was choked.

'Please don't worry about me, Mother,' said Gangeya.

'I know what you feel, Gangeya,' said the Mother. 'You are *Satyapratigna*, living in and for the truth; your death would be the crowning act of your heroic life; you would live on as a beacon-light in the memory of men because you had been one who preferred death to breaking his plighted word. But what would happen to the *dharma* which your father and you have helped to build up? That world would crash.'

Gangeya shook his head sorrowfully. 'If I don't adhere to my vow, how can I stand for *dharma*?' he asked frankly.

Tears were in the Mother's eyes; she did not know what to say.

The news travelled from mouth to mouth that the mighty Bhargava, Parashurama—Rama of the Battle Axe—was coming to Dharmakshetra.

In his own life-time Parashurama had attained to the status and dignity of a divinity, inspiring awesome veneration, worshipped by some as the God of all gods—Lord Shiva Himself.'[1]

He was the son of the highly venerated Sage Jamadagni, who had been killed by Sahasrarjuna. This ruler of Mahishmati, in the course of his invasion, had devastated Aryavarta, destroyed kingdoms, killed many revered sages, reduced *ashrams* and settlements to ashes, raped women and butchered cows.

Then Parashurama had arisen as the great avenger, destroying the invading hordes hip-and-thigh. His epic exploits had been woven into the race memory of the Aryas through song and story, describing how he had killed the mighty Sahasrarjuna with his bare hands; how he had organized an irresistible force to overcome the invader; how, under his leadership, the Aryas finally destroyed the Haihayas on the battle-field of Kurukshetra; how he had filled the five *Syamantaka* lakes with the blood of the invaders. He was said to possess the mysterious and awesome powers of a master of the Aghori cult.

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[1] For details *vide* Munshi's romance *Bhagawan Parashuram* in an English summary published by the Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan.

He had cleared Aryavarta of the invading hordes, but, as he was a strict Brahmin pledged to non-possession, he had handed back the respective territories to the rightful rulers or their descendants.

Every year he came to Aryavarta from his *ashram* in Shurparaka (Sopara) on the West Coast on his pilgrimage to the *ashram* of Nara and Narayana at Badrinath in the Himalayas and to Kurukshetra where his father, the Sage Jamadagni, had been killed and his *ashram* burnt down.

Whenever the Master came to Aryavarta, his disciples who conducted the Parashurama *ashrams* in Aryavarta to train cadets in the use of arms, joined him. They travelled in open chariots. The kings offered them hospitality; the residents of the settlements and villages on his path congregated to receive a *darshan* from the mighty saviour and secure his blessings.

When on a visit to Aryavarta, he would invariably stay for a few days with Maha Atharvan, whose predecessor in office had been his grandfather, Maha Atharvan Rickhik. When at Kurukshetra, he offered an obsequial tribute to his father on the spot where he had been killed.

On this occasion, all those living in the *ashram* of Maha Atharvan came down the hill to join the inmates of other *ashrams* in receiving the Master.

He came with the thundering swiftness of a hurricane, his chariot enveloped in a cloud of dust, followed by his disciples, each driving his own chariot.

The Master was a giant of a man, wearing a tiger-skin around his loins. In spite of his age, his muscles were powerful. His face was full, his beard ample; his matted locks rose on his head like the snowy peaks of Kailas. His large eyes, often twinkling with humour, lurked deep behind his bushy eyebrows.

He held the reins in his right hand; his mighty battle-axe rested in the crook of his left arm, its bright blade now and again flashing like lightning as the rays of the sun fell upon him.

With a twist of his wrist, he pulled up the horses and jumped out of the chariot with his battle-axe, as everyone prostrated himself before him. He held up his right hand and blessed everyone: "May you live for a hundred years."

The Master embraced Maha Atharvan and turned to Gangeya, who had prostrated himself before him, and patted his back.

'You have come, Gangeya?' asked the Master with a loud laugh and added: 'Speak with me tomorrow after the morning rituals.'

'As the Master commands,' replied Gangeya.

The Master turned to Maha Atharvan. 'Jaabaali, your daughter, with the Princess of Kashi and the attending Minister, will soon arrive. Tell someone to look after them and bring them to the *ashram*.'

'As the Master commands,' replied Maha Atharvan.

When they reached the foot of the hill, the Master turned to the crowd and said: 'All of you go and attend to your appointed tasks. Maha Atharvan will look after me.'

As he took a step forward, he suddenly turned to Gangeya who was following him. 'Gangeya, is your mother here?'

'Yes, lord,' replied Gangeya.

'Bring her with you,' he said and turned to Maha Atharvan. 'Jaabaali, your daughter is very clever,' said the Master with a chuckle. 'Where is her husband, about whom I have heard so much?'

Dvaipaayana, who was there, folded his hands. 'Master, I am here.'

'You are Paraashara's son?' asked the Master.

'Yes, lord,' replied Dvaipaayana.

'Your wife is very clever,' said the Master with amusement in his eyes. 'She was full of praise for you when she met me at Shaikhavatya's *ashram*.'

'Yes, Master. The daughter of the venerable Maha Atharvan has not yet discovered my drawbacks,' replied Dvaipaayana with a twinkle in his eyes, matching the twinkle in the eyes of the Master.

'Take care, Paraashara's son, take care,' said the Master pointing a warning finger at Dvaipaayana. 'An adoring wife will always be a drag on her husband.'

Dvaipaayana folded his hands and replied: 'Master, a critical wife would smother him.'

Both the Master and Maha Atharvan had a hearty laugh over the repartee. Their laughter was contagious; others also joined in.

'You are right, my boy,' said the Master.

With Maha Atharvan, the Master took the path which led to the *ashram*.

CHAPTER 22

THE MASTER'S DECISION

The next day, after the morning rituals were over, Sumantu brought Prince Gangeya, Dvaipaayana and the venerable Mother, sadness lending dignity to her gentle face, followed by the constant Daavi, to where Maha Atharvan and the Master were seated. After the salutations, the Master, by a gesture, asked them to take their seats on one side.

Shaunak, the principal disciple of Maha Atharvan, had brought Ambaa, the Princess of Kashi, who had arrived the previous evening. Vatikaa, the Minister, Kunik, and Hotra Vahana, the maternal grandfather of Ambaa, also came with her.

Ambaa was tall and statuesque, and wore her hair unbraided; her eyes were red and her face sullen. As soon as she saw Prince Gangeya sitting near the Master, she began to tremble, her nerves being evidently high-strung. She glared at him with irrepressible ferocity, looking like a tigress ready to jump on her victim.

'Lord,' she said to the Master in rising vehemence, 'there sits the man who has ruined my life.' She pointed at Gangeya and continued: 'He ruined my life—rendered me homeless—left me no chance of marrying Shalva—destroyed my hopes of happiness—made me a castaway in the world.'

The Master, by a gesture, asked her to take a seat and added: 'Child, compose yourself. We will set everything right presently.'

Ambaa's fury subsided into a whimper. 'Lord, I want him to marry me to compensate for his misdeeds.' The last words were choked in her throat, as she burst into tears.

The Master held up his hand. 'My child,' he said, 'you have told me your tale of woe many times. I agree with you that Gangeya ought to expiate his misdeeds.' Turing to the Prince he asked: 'Gangeya, why don't you marry Ambaa?'

Prince Gangeya folded his hands and in respectful accents, said: 'Master, it is true that I kidnapped the Princess of Kashi at the *swayamvara*. Among Kshatriyas, as you know, kidnapping a bride from a *swayamvara* is never considered sinful. We wanted her to be the Empress of Hastinapur, but she refused to marry Vichitraveerya. She wanted to marry Shalva; so we sent her to him with the wedding presents befitting a Kuru princess. But Shalva did not accept her. Then the venerable Mother....'

Ambaa interrupted vehemently: 'The venerable Mother indeed!' Then her face grew red. 'I know her now; she is a witch; she is at the back of all my troubles.'

Ambaa stood up in excitement, adjusted her scarf and pointing to the venerable Mother, continued: 'She is wicked, lord. If I could tear her eyes out....'

Every one present was shocked at Ambaa's explosion. Vatikaa got up from the place where she was sitting and seated herself near the venerable Mother.

'You can tear her eyes out after we all leave Kurukshetra,' said the Master with a laugh and made a gesture to Ambaa to take her seat. 'Be quiet.'

Ambaa shook her head. 'Why should I be quiet? She is my arch-enemy; she is the evil influence behind Gangeya.'

The venerable Mother was shocked; she had never heard such wild abuse before. 'I have never stood in the way of any one,' she murmured in distress.

'You alone have stood in my way,' Ambaa shouted. 'I know everything about you. When you married the Emperor Shantanu, Gangeya was forced to take a pledge that he would not marry.'

At the mention of this, the venerable Mother burst into tears. Vatikaa put her arms around her protectively.

'By her witchcraft,' Ambaa continued, 'she has cast a spell upon Gangeya; he has become her slave.' She repeated this remark with such vehemence that her speech became incoherent. 'This witch will not release Gangeya from the vow.'

Gangeya's eyes flashed in anger, but he mastered it and said: 'Master, the accusations made by the Princess of Kashi against the venerable Mother are untrue, unjust, and venomous. The Mother has looked after my interest more than my own mother would have done. The Princess of Kashi does not know that the venerable Mother begged of me again and again that I should give up my vow and marry the Princess of Kashi.'

'What a mother and what a son!' Ambaa laughed derisively. 'She knows that if I marry Gangeya, my son will claim the throne of the Emperor Bharat and her son will be nowhere. The Gods have been punishing her. One of her sons has been killed and the other will soon follow him to the Land of his Forefathers.'

The Master, by a gesture, again asked Ambaa to take her seat and turned to Gangeya. 'If Satyavati is willing that you should revoke your vows, why don't you do it?'

Gangeya looked down for a moment or two and spoke: 'Master, you know better than I do; if a man breaks his plighted word, he is worse than dead; he has committed spiritual suicide.

My vow is the sheet-anchor of my life. For days and nights I struggled against the temptation to break it; human nature being so weak, I had a hard time obtaining the victory over it. A vow taken is a promise given to the venerable Father, the Gods and the Forefathers. I would sooner die than break it.'

Ambaa looked at Gangeya with contempt and in derisive accents said: 'Look at the great ascetic!'

'Have I the Master's permission to speak?' asked Dvaipaayana in his most persuasive way.

'Yes, you may,' replied the Master.

'The empire of Chakravarti Bharat stands or falls with the noble Prince,' Dvaipaayana said in a quiet way and added: 'The Kshatriyas worship him as a shining example of *Kshatra Dharma* (righteous valour). People stand in awe of his superhuman moral strength.' Then he paused for a while and resumed: 'If he breaks his vow, he will forfeit the faith which the people have in him; the alliance between radiant valour and radiant *dharma* which he stands for, will give way.'

The Master listened to Dvaipaayana's words with interest.

Dvaipaayana continued: 'If I were Prince Gangeya, I would not depart from the vow. Equally, I would not combat you as you are my *guru*. In both ways *dharma* would be undermined. The choice is between Ambaa's life and life in *dharma*,' said Dvaipaayana.

The venerable Mother wiped the tears from her eyes and said: 'I beg Ambaa to name any other price. If she thinks that I am at the bottom of all her troubles, I am willing to give up my life.'

Ambaa interrupted her in a loud voice: 'I don't want your life. If Gangeya has taken a vow, so have I; either he marries me or I will see him killed.' She shot an angry glance at the venerable Mother and added: 'I am not concerned with your life.' She turned to the Master: 'This woman....'

The Master intervened sternly: '....The venerable Mother—that is who she is.'

'....She has a tongue which drips honeyed words.....' began Ambaa.

'Gangeya,' interrupted the Master, 'you must release yourself from the vow. Circumstances have changed. The purpose of your vow has been fulfilled. Satyavati's son is now Emperor of Hastinapur and married to the two Princesses of Kashi.'

The Master held up his hand to quiet Ambaa who was ready to explode.

'Gangeya, I have promised Ambaa that I will see that justice is done to her. I will have you marry her or fight me; and you know what that means,' said the Master.

'I know it too well,' said Gengeya firmly. 'I have not lived with the Master for twelve years in vain.'

'You will not break your vow then?' asked the Master.

Gangeya shook his head. 'It wounds my heart to say that I cannot comply with the Master's injunctions.'

'Will you fight me?' asked the Master with an amused smile.

Gangeya looked at the Master with eyes full of reverence. 'No, lord. I shall keep my pledge; I will see that your promise to Ambaa is kept, for it is more precious than my life.'

The Master moved his hand over his beard.

'May I speak, Master?' asked Dvaipaayana with folded hands.

The Master nodded assent, so Dvaipaayana said: 'May I respectfully point out to the Master that the empire of Chakravarti Bharat—Aryavarta itself—depends upon the strength and confidence which Prince Gangeya commands. He is *Satyapratijna*, truth incarnate. He can forswear his plighted word only at the cost of his life.'

The Mother reiterated. 'I beg of Ambaa to mention any other price that she wants. As I have already said, if I am a witch I am willing to give up my life.'

'I only want Gangeya to marry me,' Ambaa shouted. 'That is all that I want; nothing more, nothing less.' She shot an angry glace at Satyavati. Then she turned to the Master. 'Master, Gangeya refuses to break his vow.'

'Then I will fight him,' said the Master with a broad smile, which took away the edge of his remark.

'I am afraid, the Princess of Kashi does not realise the enormity of the situation if Gangeya dies,' said Dvaipaayana.

The Mother intervened: 'I beg of the Princess of Kashi to accept what I suggest: that she should marry Vichitraveerya and become the Empress of Hastinapur. I shall then retire to the forest and renounce the world.'

'I don't care what you do,' answered Ambaa contemptuously.

The Master intervened. 'Gangeya, you leave me no alternative but to fight you.'

'To fight you, my *guru*. Never, never,' said Gangeya in a solemn voice. 'I invite you, Master, to keep your promise made to the Princess of Kashi. Your mightly battle-axe is lying by your side. Take it. Here is my neck.' He placed his head at the feet of the Master.

There was a twinkle in the Master's eyes as he exploded into loud laughter and turned to Maha Atharvan. 'Maha Atharvan, everybody wants to die. Ambaa is willing to enter the fire. Satyavati wants to die. Prince Gangeya wants to die. Perhaps Dvaipaayana will die if his labours in building up *dharma* fail. And Jaabaaley*aa* would certainly like to die before her husband does.' Again the Master burst into an old warrior's full-throated laughter; his eyes were full of glee. 'Maha Atharvan, you and I are the only ones who want to live; perhaps because we are very near death.' He laughed till his face became red. 'Everyone has fallen in love with the God of Death. Jaabaali, why not you?'—he turned to Maha Atharvan, but noticing a sudden change in him, he stopped speaking.

Maha Atharvan, with his eyes closed had gone into a trance. Everybody silently noted the change. After a few moments Maha Atharvan said in a solemn voice as if coming from the other world: 'The God of Death has taken a victim who is dear to many of us. Someone is coming to bring the news; he is climbing the hill.'

The Mother went pale. The blow which she had been expecting had fallen! With a voice choked in tears, she asked Maha Atharvan: 'Whom has the God of Death taken away?'

Suddenly Maha Atharvan awoke from his trance. He looked at the expectant faces. 'Someone is coming up the hill to tell you that. Sumantu, go and receive him.'

A terrifying silence descended upon those assembled there.

Sumantu went to receive the messenger and returned with him. He was breathless and covered in dust. In his distress, he forgot to pay respects to the Master and Maha Atharvan.

Gangeya immediately recognised him as Suketu, one of the two principal Kuru chiefs. 'Suketu, what is the matter?'

Satyavati turned to Suketu and asked: 'Suketu, what is it?' Tears rolled down her cheeks.

Suketu made an effort to speak: 'The Emperor....'

Satyavati raised one of her hands to her throat as if she was choking.

Suketu summoned up his courage. 'The noble Emperor,' he addressed Gangeya, 'fell from the terrace and has been seriously injured. The worship-worthy *Purohit* has requested the venerable Mother and the noble Prince to return to Hastinapur immediately.'

'I knew, I knew,' a wail of distress issued from the Mother's lips as she fainted. Vatikaa gathered her in her arms. Sumantu sprinkled water over her face.

When the Mother opened her eyes, she was still dazed. Dvaipaayana and Vatikaa helped her to rise from the ground.

Dvaipayaana asked the Master's permission to withdraw.

'You have my permission, but listen to me, all of you,' said the Master in a tone of authority.

Everybody turned to the Master to catch his words.

'Several of you were foolish enough to invite the God of Death. Now he has come and snatched away his victim. Whatever sin Gangeya has commited is expiated by the penalty imposed by the God of Death,' said the Master.

The Master got up, lifted his battle-axe and took a step or two towards the Mother.

'Oh, Master, the light of my life is extinguished,' said the Mother amidst convulsive sobs.

'Satyavati, you should not allow the death of your sons to interfere with the work which the Gods have called you to do. I know that your life will be barren, but it is filled with a purpose. See that the line of Chakravarti Bharat does not come to an end. The triumph of *dharma* is more important than the life of any one of you,' said the Master.

Ambaa was trying to interrupt the Master, but he made a gesture to her to be silent. 'Ambaa, if Gangeya decides not to marry you, you should accept Satyavati's offer to look after you as a Kuru Princess. She badly wants a daughter to strengthen her in this crisis.'

'No, no,' said Ambaa excited. 'I want to see this man killed.'

The Master looked at her severely. 'Then, Ambaa, you had better enter the fire and kill Gangeya in your next birth. Perhaps the God of Fire will let you do it.'

Then the Master turned to Dvaipaayana. 'Son of Paraashara, my blessing on you. Complete the work which is left unfinished.'

The Master put his hand on Maha Atharvan's shoulder, as both of them left.

CHAPTER 23

'TAKE ME TO GODHULI'

PRINCE Devavrata Gangeya stood on the balcony of his mansion overlooking the river Gangaa, in a reverential attitude. He was praying to Gangaa, whom he believed to be his mother, to give him strength to face the crisis.

He was awaiting a call from the venerable Mother. The new calamity—the death of Vichitra—had changed her attitude towards the vow on which his life was anchored. She had begged of him to disregard that vow, assume kingship and marry, so that the Emperor Shantanu and his forefathers might receive obsequial offerings at the hands of his descendants. She had given him two days to ponder over her suggestion.

He saw clearly how the gloom that had descended upon Hastinapur on the death of his father was developing into a serious crisis.

His father had commanded universal respect; his achievements had been a source of pride to the Kurus; under his care, they had emerged as the pre-eminent power in Aryavarta. Yet events which had afterwards happened in quick succession had brought them frustration.

Then came the terrible episode of Ambaa, the eldest of the Kashi Princesses. He shuddered at the very thought of that ferocious young woman.

The most cruel blow of them all was the sudden death of Vichitraveerya; it left problems difficult to solve—the problem of his two young widows; of an heirless royal dynasty; of mounting pressure on him (Gangeya) to break his vow and take up the kingship; and of the position of the venerable Mother.

The venerable Mother was immensely popular with the people. Her heart was stirred by the distress and poverty of the poor. She was highly honoured by the Kurus, for she was generous in her affections and extremely wise. If a collateral succeeded to the throne, she, who had been venerated as a guardian deity of Hastinapur, would be reduced to the position of a shadowy dowager, with two young widows without royal status to be looked after.

Gangeya's thinking was interrupted by a Minister, Kaundinya. 'The venerable Mother is ready to receive the Best of Bharatas.'

'I wonder whether I am ready to meet her,' murmured Gangeya. Meeting the Mother had always been a source of inspiration to him, but on this occasion he felt as if he was going to the gallows.

She was sittng, as usual, near the little shrine of the Great God, which had been constructed to enable her to worship Him whenever she wanted.

Gangeya noted that her face reflected deep anguish and her eyes were full of unshed tears.

Behind the Mother sat Vatikaa. Daavi was standing by the closed doors to see that no one entered the room.

On one side of the Mother were seated Muni Dvaipaayana —now respectfully styled Muni Paraasaarya (son of Paraashara), —and his disciple Sumantu. On the other side sat Mahabahu and Suketu, two very senior Kuru Elders, and the Minister, Kunik. Before her were seated the preceptor of the Kurus, Acharya Vibhuti, in a silk scarf and gold necklace and waistband, his old father Brahmistha, and his deputy, Acharya Devayaana.

Gangeya offered salutation to the Mother. She silently blessed him by extending her right hand, wiping her tearful eyes with a corner of her scarf.

In salutation, Gangeya also touched the feet of Muni Dvaipaayana, the Acharyas and the Kuru Elders, and took his seat. The faces of all of them were solemn and the voice of Acharya Vibhuti, when he began to speak, was full of sadness.

He said : 'Best of Bharatas, we have discussed this matter for a whole day and half the night from every point of view. We are all agreed that you should marry. Without a male heir, your noble father, his forefathers and you yourself after you have joined them, will be deprived of obsequial offerings; it will be a deep humiliation. The power of the Kurus will disintegrate. The rule of *dharma*, which your noble father and you have built up, will collapse. The venerable Mother agrees with us'.

The Mother nodded assent.

'What about you, Bal-Muni?' asked Gangeya of Dvaipaayana.

'I leave everything to the venerable Mother', said Dvaipaayana in a detached manner.

'If you do not marry and occupy the throne, noble Gangeya', said Mahabahu, the most senior of the Kuru Elders, 'the Kurus will face a tragic situation. You realise the sinister possibilities of the situation. If you do not occupy the kingship, I as the nearest collateral, would be entitled to succeed to the throne, but in the interests of the Kurus, I do not want to. Yet my eldest son would succeed to it—and rightly; it is his privilege. But, I am sure, he would not be able to keep the Kurus together. It is unnatural for me to make such a sacrifice, but I love Hastinapur more than my family.'

'Your own position would suffer, noble Gangeya', said Acharya Vibhuti. 'Noble Mahabahu's family would not endure your leadership.'

Suketu intervened : 'Both of us, my brother Mahabahu and myself, have discussed this matter between us. My sons and nephews are sure not to accept Mahabahu's son as king. Regardless of the interests of our families, we have, therefore, come to the conclusion that the only way out would be for you to accept our advice; break your vows and save Hastinapur from calamity'.

'Uncle', replied Gangeya in a very low, sad voice, 'I fully realise that I will have committed a crime against the Kurus and a sin in the eyes of the Gods. There will be no male descendant to give obsequial offerings to my father and forefathers and to me when I join them'. He paused and added : 'A fratricidal war might begin even during my lifetime.'

'Intrigues have already started in anticipation of your not accepting the kingship', said Acharya Vibhuti.

'True', said Brahmistha in his hoarse voice, roofing his eyes with his palm.

Gangeya continued in the same low voice : 'I realise that I will be the cause of all these misfortunes.'

'Then, why not accept our advice, noble Gangeya, and marry ?' asked Acharya Vibhuti.

'Best of Acharyas,' replied Gangeya, 'the venerable Mother has discussed with me every aspect of this misfortune and I have myself pondered over her suggestion.'

The Mother looked down to conceal the expression on her face—the expression of a wounded animal, and said : 'Then you reject my prayer ?'

'Mother, please do not be offended, but look at my plight', said Gangeya in an appealing voice. 'How can I break my vow? When I took it, I had to undergo a terrible struggle which I carried on for years whether awake or asleep. Untimately I emerged victorious, and eliminated women from my life. How can I come to terms with it now ?'

Mahabahu wanted to interrupt, but Gangeya stopped him: 'Bear with me, Uncle, for a few moments. The Gods have so ordained that the only escape left to me is to break my vow of lifelong celibacy. If I don't break it, the Kurus are sure to look upon me as an obstinate fool, a traitor, a sinner.'

'You are quite right, noble Prince', said Acharya Vibhuti, nodding his head. 'Then, why not accept our advice?'

Gangeya folded his hands and continued in humility : 'I beg all of you, venerable *Srotriyas* and noble Uncles,—you, venerable Mother, whom I have always respected above everything—to look at the choice with which I am faced. I am honoured because I am recognised as *Satyapratijna*—as an image of *dharma*—almost a God, who would rather die than break his plighted word. For the last two days, I have been struggling hard to reconcile myself to accepting your request. At moments I have stood on the brink of hell. He paused and wiped the beads of perspiration from his forehead with his scarf. 'Please don't ask me, I beg of you, to break my vow. It would be worse than death; it would be the death of *dharma* in me—a spiritual suicide.'

Gangeya's fine face reflected the anguish of his heart. Everyone realised his position and felt sympathy at what he was passing through, the Mother more than anyone else.

The old Brahmistha raised his trembling hand and spoke in a hoarse voice : 'Best of Kurus, we know the difficulties which you are facing with regard to breaking your vow. There is a way out, a way which the venerable Mother approves. You can keep your vow and still prevent the line of Emperor Shantanu from becoming extinct.'

'What is the way ?' asked Gangeya. 'I see none.'

Brahmistha, holding up his shaking hand, said : 'By way of *Niyoga*. It is old fashioned now, but has the sanction of the venerable *rishis*.'

Gangeya was shocked at what was proposed. He thought that he had not heard old Brahmistha's suggestion and said : 'You mean that I should beget sons on the wives of my younger brothers ?'

'It is an ancient custom sanctioned by the sages,' said Brahmishta.

Gangeya was indignant. For a moment he was on the point of giving vent to his anger. 'I beget sons on the Princesses of Kashi, whom I look upon as my daughters !' he exclaimed. 'Unthinkable.'

'At times it becomes the paramount duty of the surviving brother to continue the family. As the WORD has said : Never cut off the line of your descent,' said Brahmistha.

Hope kindling in his heart, Mahabahu intervened : 'In our family we had an instance of *Niyoga*. My grandfather was born of it.'

Recovering from the shock, Gangeya firmly asserted : 'I *will* not. *Niyoga* is marriage.'

Acharya Vibhuti, in his most persuasive way, intervened :

'*Niyoga* is not marriage, noble Prince. It is a solemn ritual. You don't go through it to satisfy carnal desires, but to pay your debt to your ancestors. The family is cursed which has no male heir to give obsequial offerings to its forefathers'.

Gangeya shook his head.

Acharya Vibhuti, however, continued : 'The Princesses will only offer their bodies to perform the ritual.'

Gangeya bit his lips to prevent an outburst of rage. 'I will not touch the Princesses in the way that you desire. I will not convert my vow into a fraud.'

Brahmistha said : 'Your vow is not to marry, but *Niyoga* is not marriage.'

Gangeya shook his head and said : '*Niyoga* is a form of marriage and nothing else.'

'Prince Gangeya', said Acharya Vibhuti, 'we all feel miserable and share your misery. But reflect upon the suggestion very carefully. You will find it the only way out.'

'There is no need for me to reflect,' said Gangeya decisively, indignant at the persistence of the *Srotriya*. He added : 'I know that my keeping the vow would open the door to many misfortunes. The only remedy I have is so to live in the coming years that my father's throne remains powerful, whoever occupies it, and that *dharma* flourishes.'

The venerable Mother pulled down her scarf to cover her face so that no one could see the change that was coming over her.

'I assure you that I will be more steadfast in upholding *dharma*,' said Gangeya.

'Then, consider for a moment the plight of the Mother when a collateral succeeds to the throne,' said Brahmistha.

'I have been thinking deeply about the Mother,' said Gangeya and paused for a while. Then he continued : 'So long as I am alive, I will maintain her status and authority. I will also see that even after I am called away, she continues to command the same loyalty and reverence. She has been the guardian deity of the Kurus, and so she shall remain in my lifetime and thereafter as long as she lives.'

The venerable Mother, for the first time, lifted the scarf from her face and in a voice trembling with emotion, said : 'Noble Gangeya, you have given me your love and loyalty, but you need not take any heed of me, nor of the welfare of the Kashi Princesses'. Then she added : 'I deserve the punishment that the Gods have inflicted upon me. As a wife, I have failed in my duty to *Arya-*

putra by failing to give him a son who would offer him obsequial offerings.' She looked up. Her face was flushed, her eyes no longer humid. With ineffable dignity, she added, her voice gathering strength as she spoke : 'I have decided to retire to the *ashram* at Godhuli where the body of Muni Paraashara was placed in the arms of the God of Fire. I will also take the Kashi Princesses with me.'

Every one was surpirsed at the sudden decision. They were bewildered; they did not know what to say.

The Mother got up from her seat, adjusted the scarf over her head and took a step to leave the room. Then she turned to Dvaipaayana : 'Krishna, take me to Godhuli.'

CHAPTER 24

"IF THE MOTHER LEAVES ?"

WHEN the venerable Mother left the room, followed by Vatikaa and Daavi, the atmosphere became tense. Every one felt as if a gulf had yawned at his feet.

Prince Gangeya, the learned *Srotriyas* and the Kuru chiefs looked at each other, almost panic-stricken.

Throughout the episode, no one had anticipated that the venerable Mother, by her swift and emphatic action, would show she resented being reduced to a helpless dowager Empress, depending upon the favour of the ruling Emperor, not descended from Shantanu.

On Gangeya's usually stern face, there was the shadow of a great anxiety. He could visualize the magnitude of the crisis which would overtake Hastinapur if the venerable Mother left it.

The ordinary people, who looked upon her as a beneficent divinity, would invoke curses on him as the architect of their misfortunes. They would never forgive his rigidity if she were to retire to the Godhuli *ashram.*

Even the Kuru chiefs and their families, whatever their mutul jealousies and distrust, had come to look upon her as the guardian-deity of the Kurus; on many an occasion she had helped those in difficulties and had intervened in their family feuds with loving kindness and homely wisdom.

The faces of those sitting there—all except Dvaipaayana's —reflected what they thought of him, Gangeya, the architect of all the misfortunes that had been overtaking Hastinapur of late.

Gangeya knew the Mother well. She was fair-minded, indulgent and pliable; she knew the difficult art of yielding with grace. But on the very rare occasions when she took decisive action, there was no prospect of her changing her mind.

Acharya Vibhuti, the preceptor of the Kurus, was the first to break the uncomfortable silence. He coughed and in a hesitant voice, very unusual for him, said : 'We never foresaw this terrible situation.'

The ninety-two-year-old Brahmistha, father of Acharya Vibhuti, the *Purohit* of three generations of Kuru rulers, peered at Gangeya as was his habit. Even at this age, he was mentally alert and had not forgotten a single syllable of the WORD.

He had the uncomfortable habit of showing his contempt whenever his advice was not heeded; with a look of triumph, he said : 'Noble Prince Gangeya, this comes of your not heeding my advice.'

'Worship-worthy Acharya, I entirely agree with you', said *Atirathi* Suketu, the Kuru elder, who headed one of the Kuru sections. 'The Kurus will go wild with rage if it comes to be known that the venerable Mother is leaving Hastinapur. For fifteen years every one in Hastinapur has been looking upon her as the Mother, not as a matter of form, but because they take her to be a veritable *Annapurna*—the Godess of Abundance.'

'I agree with you, noble Suketu', said Mahabahu, 'every family in Hastinapur would feel as if a curse had descended upon the Kurus.'

Gangeya, in great distress, turned to Muni Dvaipaayana and asked : 'What shall we do, venerable Dvaipaayana ?'

Dvaipaayana was sitting quietly all the time. He replied : 'I have no place in the State affairs of the Kurus. I am here only to carry out the wishes of the venerable Mother.'

Daavi came into the room and saluted all those present in one sweeping formal gesture; by her tone and manner, however, she made it clear that these people, who were ready to drive her august mistress out of Hastinapur, did not deserve to be saluted.

She approached Dvaipaayana, folded her hands and said : 'Venerable Muni, my august mistress wants to see you and Minister Kaundinya. Please come'.

Dvaipaayana and Kaundinya both got up and left with Daavi.

Acharya Vibhuti was most unhappy. It was crisis of *dharma* and the responsibility was his to show a way out. 'What shall we do now, noble Prince?' he asked, turning to Prince Gangeya. 'The solution is in your hands. Either you give up your vows or let the Mother go.'

Gangeya looked up, his lips pressed tight. 'Worship-worthy Acharya, the Gods have been very cruel to me; I am made to face one trial after another.'

'We could easily tide over this crisis,' said the Acharya.

Slowly and sadly, Gangeya said : 'People will rightly consider me as having driven away the venerable Mother from Hastinapur. For the moment I am confused.'

'You have all contributed towards creating this terrible situation. Now we had better face the consequences,' said Brahmistha in disgust.

'Could you, Father, induce the venerable Mother to give up her resolve to go to Godhuli ?' asked Acharya Vibhuti.

'When you are tired of trying to find a way, come to me and

I will show one to you,' said Brahmistha.

'What is that, Worship-worthy Acharya ?' asked Suketu.

'Why should I waste time ? I know that you will not accept it nor will the Kurus. Let them walk the way to destruction,' said Brahmistha.

'Worship-worthy Acharya, I will accept any suggestion which Mother approves; only I ought not to be asked to give up my vows,' said Gangeya.

'But is there such a way ?' asked Vibhuti of his father.

'None of you will accept my advice if I show you a way out of the difficulty,' said Brahmistha.

'There is nothing that I will not accept,' said Suketu. 'I see it clearly. If the venerable Mother leaves us and if the noble Gangeya sticks to his vows, you, Mahabahu, or your son will have to be installed as king. But that would immediately lead to civil war among the Kurus.'

'What is the way out?' asked Gangeya, anxious to find a solution.

'There is no way out except following the old practice of *Niyoga*', said Acharya Vibhuti, 'but the noble Prince will not think of it.'

'It is condemned by many ancient texts,' said Dvaipayaana. As an expert in texts, he now spoke for the first time.

'I know,' said Vibhuti, 'but several ancients have proclaimed it as necessary for saving the family from extinction and enabling the forefathers to receive obsequial offerings.'

Chapter 25

"I BOW TO YOUR COMMANDS"

Brahmistha's trembling voice became insistent; his fragile body shook with excitement. 'Don't get yourself lost in a tangle of arguments. Answer me straight: Do you want the noble Kashi Princesses to beget sons by *Niyoga* or not?' he asked.

Prince Gangeya as well as others nodded assent.

'We have already approved of it. Only Prince Gangeya will not think of it,' said Acharya Vibhuti.

'You are all aware of the coming calamity, but you are cowards and cannot face it,' said Brahmistha. 'What about you, noble chiefs? Will the Kurus accept *Niyoga*?'

They smiled wryly.

'The Kurus may object to *Niyoga* in the beginning, but ultimately they will agree,' said Mahabahu.

The old Brahmistha chuckled, smiling. 'If they are willing to accept *Niyoga* from a step-brother, will they approve of *Niyoga* from a *matru-bandhu*—brothers or cousins on the maternal side?' he asked.

Every one understood whom he suggested and shook his head. Gangeya alone looked up eagerly to discuss the new way suggested by Brahmistha.

'Answer me unequivocally: Will the Kurus of all the factions accept the sons of the Kuru princesses begotten by a *matru-bandhu* as the legitimate successors to the Emperor Shantanu?' asked Brahmistha.

Acharya Vibhuti turned to the Kuru chiefs. 'Do you realize what he is saying? The rulers of Hastinapur will not be the blood-descendants of the noble Emperor Shantanu; they will be the descendants of the Mother, who is a Kuru by marriage. Will the Kurus accept it?'

'It is difficult to say,' said Mahabahu.

'I cannot help obstinate fools. Let Gangeya keep his vows; let the Mother leave Hastinapur; let the Kurus fight it out between themselves.' The old man was working up to a rage. 'Vibhuti, give me your hand. Those who do not accept my advice are not fit to be given it.' He caught hold of Vibhuti's hand and got up, ready to leave.

'Don't go away, Worship-worthy Acharya,' said Gangeya. 'I will bring round the Kurus. The situation is very critical.'

'Listen,' the old Brahmistha said. 'Remember one thing:

If you want to preserve the power of Hastinapur and keep it as the protector of *dharma*, you must accept my suggestion. If you do not, nothing prevents you from rushing into hell; its gates are open.'

'We will accept it,' said Gangeya.

'Will the Mother accept it ? Will the *matru-bandhu* himself accept it ?' asked Brahmistha, and added : 'That is for you to decide, not for us.'

Dvaipaayana returned to the room. The others breathlessly awaited what he had to say. He said : 'The venerable Mother has commanded Minister Kaundinya to make preparations for the journey to Godhuli *ashram* tomorrow at noon.'

'Is there no hope of her changing her mind ?' asked Mahabahu.

'None,' replied Dvaipaayana.

'Venerable Dvaipaayana, wont' you induce her to change her mind ?' asked Gangeya.

'You know as well as I do, noble Prince, that once her mind is made up, she will not change it. She has also sent a message : "Don't try to persuade me. I came to Hastinapur to make the *Aryaputra* and the Kurus happy. I cannot remain here and see them unhappy," said Dvaipaayana.

'We have found a way out,' said Acharya Vibhuti, 'Gangeya shall not break his vow ; the Mother shall not leave Hastinapur.'

'That is wonderful', said Dvaipaayana sarcastically.

'Yes, we have found a way. Please ask the venerable Mother to come here. I would like to place the solution before her,' said Acharya Vibhuti.

Dvaipaayana went out and after a little while, returned with the venerable Mother, followed by Vatikaa and Daavi.

'Mother, we have found a way,' said Gangeya.

'I have already found a way for myself,' said the Mother.

'Please, Mother, listen to me,' said Gangeya. 'And if you find the solution acceptable, I will not have to break my vows and you, Mother, will stay with us.'

'How do you propose to achieve such a miracle ?' asked the Mother, puzzled at Gangeya's confident attitude.

'We have decided that the line of the Emperor Shantanu shall continue by *Niyoga*,' said Gangeya.

'But you refuse to accept the suggestion,' said the Mother.

Acharya Vibhuti, in his most persuasive way, said : 'The Princesses shall bear sons, though not by Prince Gangeya.' He smiled, paused and added : 'But by Muni Dvaipaayana. He is a *matru-bandhu* of noble Vichitraveerya. We beg of you to remain as you are—the guardian-deity of the Kurus.'

Dvaipaayana was taken aback at this unexpected suggestion.

The venerable Mother, unable to understand the implications of what Acharya Vibhuti had said, placed her hand on her forehead for a moment. Then she said : 'Let me understand you properly. You want Dvaipaayana to beget sons on the Kashi Princesses ? The Kurus will never accept them as the rightful heirs of *Aryaputra*. Who will guarantee their succession to the throne ?'

'I promise you, Mother', said Gangeya. 'I will see that the throne of Hastinapur is occupied by the sons begotten on one of the Kashi Princesses by Dvaipaayana.'

'Has Dvaipaayana agreed to this suggestion ?' asked the Mother.

'I don't agree to it,' said Dvaipaayana.

'And what are the views of Jaabaaleyaa ? Do you agree Jaabaaleyaa ?' asked the Mother, turning to her.

Vatikaa looked down respectfully and said : 'I will have to think it over before I agree.'

'What will the Kurus say when the throne of *Aryaputra* is occupied by Dvaipaayan's sons ?' asked the Mother.

'I and my brother Suketu are agreed on one thing : if one of our sons succeeds to the throne, there is going to be a civil war,' said Mahabahu. 'Our decision may look unnatural in the eyes of our families. But we grew up with the noble Emperor Shantanu from our childhood and we took a solemn pledge years ago that we would help him build up Hastinapur as a formidable power in the world. We stood by the Emperor in every crisis. We cannot fail in our loyalty, now because he has joined his forefathers.'

'Do you think that the Kurus will accept the suggestion ?' asked Acharya Vibhuti.

'Yes,' replied Mahabahu. 'If both of us are agreed, we are sure, our sons will accept it.'

'If they defy us, we shall disown them,' said Suketu.

Gangeya looked unhappily at Dvaipaayana, and in an appealing voice, said : 'Everything now depends on your decision.'

Dvaipaayana said curtly : 'I will let you know my decision tomorrow.'

Brahmistha roofed his eyes and peered at Dvaipaayana. He raised his other trembling hand to indicate that he wanted to be heard.

Everyone lapsed into silence, expecting that the old *Srotriya* was about to cause fresh amazement.

'Now, listen, Dvaipaayana,' said Brahmistha. 'There is going to be no tomorrow. The thing has to be decided today, here and now.'

The old man paused for a moment and continued: 'The Gods have worked miracle after miracle; they gave Muni Paraashara a gifted son; they made him the most eminent *Srotriya* in Aryavarta; they gave him the privilege of restoring Dharmakshetra. They raised his mother, a fisher-girl, to be a powerful Empress. They worked the miracle of bringing the mother and son together after they were parted, never hoping to meet again. They gave him a patron like the Emperor Shantanu; why, not a patron, but a father.'

Brahmistha cleared his throat and continued: 'We, the *Srotriyas*, the Kurus, Aryavarta and *dharma* itself, are passing through a terrible crisis. The Kurus, divided, are facing destruction. No discussion is going to prevent it. You alone can save them.'

'Let us know once for all: Do you agree to *Niyoga* or not? There is no time to be wasted; we have already had endless discussions; discussion cannot lead to action.'

'We have to decide—here and now.' Brahmistha raised his voice. 'Do you agree to participate in the *Niyoga* ritual or not? You can save the Kurus and help *dharma* to be re-established, or in your arrogance you can let the Kurus destroy themselves—and also *dharma*—so that there will be neither *brahma-tej* nor *kshatra-tej*.'

The old *Srotriya* sat up erect and in a decisive manner continued: 'The choice is not to be made by the Mother or by Gangeya or by Vatikaa—not even by you. It has been made by the Gods; they have decided upon *Niyoga*, however unpleasant it is to you.'

Brahmistha paused, gathered his breath and continued: 'Answer me straight: Will you or will you not perform the ritual?' The voice of the patriarch rose almost into a threat. He recaptured the authoritative voice of his earlier days.

Dvaipaayana bowed his head and said in a hesitant voice: 'Worship-worthy Acharya, I bow to your commands.'

CHAPTER 26

SHUKA CREATES A PROBLEM

TIME began to fly on speedy wings.

Vatikaa had a busy time running a home for her husband, who spent most of the days conducting the *Shraut Satra*. Time and again she went to Hastinapur to keep the venerable Mother company. She was a bold and resourceful woman and very affectionate by nature, and the Mother had come to rely upon her in her difficulties.

The Kurus, who loved the Mother, were aghast when they heard the report that she was leaving Hastinapur. The womenfolk of the leading Kurus came to her mansion to induce her to give up the idea. However, they found to their pleasant surprise that she had already decided to stay on in Hastinapur. The Mother felt happy at the idea that so many people loved her and that whatever sacrifices she had made were worth making.

During this period, Gangeya—now referred to as "Bheeshma—the Terrible" on account of the vows that he had taken and the way in which he had kept them—subdued turbulent kings and chiefs, protected the *ashrams* and the villages, and upheld righteous living. By his devotion to *dharma*, he became the symbol of *kshatra-tej*, and under his guidance, many of the Kuru chiefs recaptured the life of *dharma* which had come to be neglected during the period of the war.

The work of collecting and sorting out the hymns of the WORD was very difficult, but under Dvaipaayana's leadership, very soon form was given to each hymn, the order of the words and the cadence being standardized.

Dvaipaayana had placed Paila in charge of collecting and writing down the *Rig Veda*, Jaimini in charge of *Sama Veda*, and Vaisampaayana in charge of *Yajur Veda*. Sumantu, her brother, had been placed in charge of fitting the Atharvana lore into the framework of the WORD. Each of them had several *Srotriyas* working under him.

During the twelve years the *Shraut Satra* was held, Dharmakshetra attracted *Srotriyas* and Brahmacharis from *ashrams* all over Aryavarta. Most of the leading *Srotriyas* came to participate in it and to acquire the established chant of the WORD under the guidance of Dvaipaayana and his pupils.

It was not easy to memorize the WORD, maintain its perfection and chant it with the appropriate cadence. Any change by negligence or accident would deprive the WORD of its divinity and the defaulter would lose his status as a *Srotriya*.

After the training, they went to their parent *ashrams* or started one of their own, thus extending the frontiers of Dvaipaayana's empire.

Under the ceaseless drive of Dvaipaayana, several *ashrams* became the centres of vast learning. Thus, a very voluminous literature of prayers, invocations and ceremonial chants for rituals, preserved by word of mouth, came into existence.

On the final day of the *Shraut Satra*, Dvaipaayana received an ovation from all the *Srotriyas*, and also the kings and chiefs, led by Gangeya, who had gathered on the occasion. They hailed him as Veda Vyaasa, the Great Recorder of the WORD, the Master.

Evil planets, however, continued to rule the destiny of the Kurus of Hastinapur. Both Satyavati and Gangeya had to face one calamity after another.

Vatikaa often had to go to Hastinapur. Looking after Satyavati was no small job either, for she had to face one crisis after another, and each of them put a terrible strain on her.

No sooner was the episode of Ambaa over than the problem of *Niyoga* oppressed her. After it was solved, it raised many complications.

Ambikaa gave birth to a robust and healthy son. Tears were in the eyes of the venerable Mother when she first took the baby in her hands and found that it was blind. She realized that, according to the ancient canons, he could not succeed to his father's heritage. However, she did not want Ambikaa to be miserable; she concealed her tears by bending her head and hugged the baby to her heart.

'What shall we call him, Ambikaa ?' asked the Mother.

'Whatever you like, Mother,' replied Ambikaa.

'I would like to call him Dhritraashtra, the upholder of the nation,' said the Mother.

Ambikaa was exultant. 'Yes, I am sure he will uphold the nation.'

Ambalikaa also gave birth to a son, who was named Pandu because he was pale and emaciated, not likely to survive for long.

The Mother induced Ambikaa to receive Dvaipaayana again. However, Ambikaa did not feel happy at the prospect and set her maid instead to fulfil the ritual. The maid was in esctasy; it was a privilege to spend a night with the Muni. In course of time, she gave birth to a healthy and bright-eyed son. He was named Vidur.

When the *Shraut Satra* was over, Dvaipaayana made a programme for the coming twelve years. He decided to go round all the important *ashrams*, helping their inmates to master the WORD with accuracy and become centres of righteous living, and returning to Dharmakshetra only to spend the rainy season there.

With ten disciples and several others who joined him on the way, Dvaipaayana began his tour of the *ashrams*.

Up and down the rivers, Ganga, Sarasvati and Yamuna, Dvaipaayana and his companions visited the *ashrams* from Hardwar to Kashi and the settlements also when invited by the people or the local chiefs.

Wherever he went, Dvaipaayana was greeted by the *Srotriyas* as the Master and worshipped by others as a divinity whose blessing would secure for them welfare in this life and happiness in the next.

During their stay in an *ashram*, the Master and his companions corrected the deviations from the WORD, and the order of words or their cadence, as laid down at the *Shraut Satra*. By example and precept, they also imposed a life of *tapas*, self-imposed austerity, on the *Srotriyas* of the *ashram*, and taught them to redeem the pledge taken when they were invested with the sacred thread, praying to the Sun God for enlightenment in terms of the *Gayatri mantra* :

> "*We shall adore the effulgence of the divine ruler, Savita*
> *(the Sun God).*
> *We shall always seek his life-giving light.*
> *May it enrich and stimulate the power of our minds.*"

They attracted the villagers by teaching them to maintain the worship of the sacred fire; by curing their ailments by *mantra-vidya* or the use of magic plants; by helping families to settle feuds and by inculcating in the womenfolk the importance of observing strict loyalty to their families as the most basic element to preserve happiness in them.

The visit of the Master to an *ashram* was an experience of immense value and was looked forward to. It taught the *Srotriyas* to live in austere self-discipline and initiated the village-folks into devotion.

Shuka, Dvaipaayana's son by Vatikaa, when he was eight years old, was invested with the sacred thread ceremonially. When he was twelve years old, he was sent to the Godhuli *ashram*, which was presided over by Acharya Gautama, Dvaipaayana's own *guru*.

Vatikaa was loath to part with her son, but Dvaipaayana was of the view that in an out-of-the-way *ashram*, he would easily get the training to face life later.

She was very proud of her son. He was fair like herself; his face was more like his father's. His memory was phenomenal and he could chant the WORD with inimitable grace.

Vatikaa was anxiously waiting for the completion of Shuka's twelve years of Brahmacharya, when he would be permitted to found a home and to see him wedded to a bride whom she had already selected. But Shuka did not come.

The year passed, and she did not know what do to. In the meantime a report was brought to her that Shuka wanted to avoid founding and become a *sanyasi* straight-away renouncing the world. This was very disquieting and Vatikaa decided to consult the venerable Mother about it.

The venerable Mother immediately sent a litter to bring Vatikaa to Hastinapur. On the way, Vatikaa was miserable all the time.

When she was received by the venerable Mother at the gate of her mansion, Vatikaa fell at her feet. The Mother raised her and affectionately breathed in the scent of her hair by way of blessing. The Mother's touch was soothing. In spite of the years and the pressure of one calamity after another, she remained the very embodiment of grace, and by her loving kindness, made every one feel that he had a place in her heart.

The Mother threw a protective arm around Vatikaa's back and led her to the apartment with the little shrine in which she spent her day. 'What is the matter ?' she asked.

'Shuka is not coming back,' replied Vatikaa. 'During the whole of the last year, I have been waiting for him to come and found his home, but for one reason or another, he has not come. And now I hear a report that he does not want to make it at all; he wants to renounce the world.'

'Who told you that ?' asked the Mother.

'Certain *Srotriyas* who had come to Dharmakshetra from Godhuli,' replied Vatikaa.

'But has he sent you word why he does not come to Dharmakshetra ?' asked the Mother.

'No. Despite several messages sent by me, he has not come. His only reply has been : "Mother, don't vex yourself. I shall come at the appropriate time." It will be a calamity if Shuka renounces the world,' said Vatikaa.

'The sinister planets dominate our life,' said the Mother.

'One grandson is born blind; the other is pale and emaciated; now the third threatens to renounce the world.'

'Mother, do something to bring him back to us so that he can found a home,' pleaded Vatikaa. 'How can his life be complete without a good wife ?'

'I agree with you. We must immediately seek out Dvaipaayana. He will persuade Shuka to come to Hastinapur, and once he is here, it will be easy to induce him to give up such a foolish decision. Do you know precisely where Dvaipaayana is ?' asked the Mother.

'I don't know, but there was a message some days back that, on his way back to Hastinapur, the Muni would go to Godhuli, where Pangu Muni was cremated and pay a visit to the Field of Ashes,' said Vatikaa.

The Mother wiped away Vatikaa's tears. 'Don't cry, child. We will immediately seek out Dvaipaayana so that he may bring Shuka here and ask him to give up the folly of never founding a home. Daavi, go and fetch Kunik. He will find out some way seeking out Dvaipaayana.'

'I am so unhappy,' said Vatikaa. 'I have the best of husbands, but he leaves me alone. I have the best of sons—handsome, brilliant and affectionate, but he wants to renounce the world.' She hid her face in the lap of the Mother.

'Dont' worry. We will straighten matters out,' assured the Mother.

The Minister, Kunik, came in.

'Kunik, come here. Sit down,' said the Mother, and turned to Vatikaa. 'Don't cry, Vatikaa. He is a very resourceful man and can find a way out of any difficulty.'

Kunik folded his hands, bowed in reverence and said diplomatically, 'Whatever resourcefulness I have is due to your blessing, venerable Mother.'

The venerable Mother apprised Kunik of the situation. 'What is to be done, if the boy does not come here ?' she asked.

'It is no use troubling yourself, Mother,' said Kunik. 'He is a young boy, highly impressionable and may have been led away by someone. If you permit me, I will take a boat to Godhuli after I have secured the permission of the noble Gangeya.'

'Yes. Tell Gangeya how important it is for you to go and meet the Muni as early as possible,' said the Mother and turned to Vatikaa. 'Don't vex yourself, Vatikaa. I shall see that everything is put right. Sometimes we see dangers which simply do not exist.'

CHAPTER 27

THE SON OF MAHISHAASURA, THE BUFFALO GOD

IT WAS not difficult to find out where Muni Dvaipaayana was, for whichever *ashram* Kunik visited had vivid memories of his visit.

The fast-moving royal boat with its twenty rowers soon caught up with him.

The Minister, Kunik, gave the message from the venerable Mother to the Muni.

'I am glad that the venerable Mother has sent me the message,' said the Muni. 'The day after tomorrow, we will be at Godhuli. I met Shuka some months ago when I went there. I think he is still there. Acharya Gautama was full of praise for him.'

'The venerable Mother and the respected Jaabaaleyaa would like to see Shuka found a home,' said the Minister, Kunik.

'I also share their view,' replied the Muni. 'Twleve years of *Brahmacharya* are all that human nature can bear. Yet on all accounts, Shuka is a good boy, and if he disagrees with his mother, he must have good reason to do so.'

The royal boat sped fast, with Dvaipaayana's boat in tow. When they approached the Field of Ashes, the boatman would not pass by the accursed field; whoever did so met with a serious calamity, it was believed. They took the boats to the opposite bank and returned to the old course when the Field was left behind.

When they approached Godhuli, a fearful sight met their eyes : tribesmen with bows and arrows, spears and bamboos in their hands, surrounded the *ashram* grounds; the *ashram* had been burnt to the ground; some of the woodwork was still burning. Tribesmen were still prodding the charred remains of an animal, from which smoke was issuing. There was no trace of the inmates.

Krivi, the head boatman of Dvaipaayana's boat, shuddered. He had ferried Dvaipaayana for years and held him in great respect. 'Bal-Muni,' he said in a whisper, 'this is strange. When I passed Godhuli eight or nine days ago, this *ashram* was as flourishing as ever. As usual, Acharya Gautama invited us to a meal. This must be the work of Mosa, the new Chief.'

'When did you come to know that the old chief Proppa was dead and Mosa was installed as tribal chief ?' asked the Muni.

'We heard of this calamity only as we were leaving the *ashram*', replied Krivi.

'I knew that father and son were not on good terms, that

Mosa hated the *ashram*. But Acharya Gautama had faith that when Mosa became the chief, he would be able to win him over; he was too good-natured to understand men like Mosa', said the Muni.

'Mosa is in the hands of a section of the tribe which was against the old chief,' said Krivi.

'I don't understand why he should quarrel with the *ashram*. It has made life better for the tribe. Violence has decreased. Women have been happier.'

'This section,' continued Krivi, 'hated those who wanted their daughters and sisters to be married to the inmates of the *ashram*. Many of our young women, under the inspiration of mother Sharmi, were anxious to get married into the *ashram*.'

'I understand it now,' said the Muni.

'Burning down the *ashram* seems to have been his first act. Possibly he may have killed Acharya Gautama and the other inmates. He is very harsh and cruel. I would advise you not to go there,' said Krivi.

The Minister, Kunik, also joined Krivi in advising the Muni not to face the murderous fury of Mosa.

'No, Kunik,' replied the Muni. 'We must find out what has happened to the inmates of the *ashram*. As you know, I was brought up by Acharya Gautama and mother Sharmi. Perhaps Shuka is there also.'

'It is more than probable,' said Krivi, 'that Mosa killed the inmates before he set fire to the *ashram*.'

'What would have happened to mother Sharmi and the other women ?' asked the Muni.

'They might have been taken to the tribal headquarters or they might have fled to the Field of Ashes,' said Krivi.

'I want to request you, Kunik, to accommodate my disciples in your boat. Krivi belongs to the tribe of Mosa, but he and his sons are thoroughly loyal to us. They will take me to the bank,' said the Muni.

'Must you go alone ?' asked the Minister, Kunik. 'You should take a couple of archers with you.'

'No, Kunik,' said the Muni. 'If I approach the bank accompanied by archers, the Chief may cut the throat of every one of the prisoners.'

'But our own life is very valuable; you are the architect of the new *dharma*,' said the Minister, Kunik.

'If the Gods have decided that I am no longer needed for their work, Mosa will not hesitate to kill me,' said the Muni.

Then he paused and laughed. 'If they try to kill me, you may get an opportunity of testing whether *brahma-tej* can do without *kshatra-tej.*'

'We can easily overcome the tribesmen,' said the Minister Kunik.

'Your archers can certainly overwhelm the tribesmen, but if there is a conflict, Mosa may kill the inmates. I am asking the Gods to let me save them,' said the Muni.

Kunik threw up his arms in despair. 'As the venerable Muni pleases. But if anything happens to you, Prince Gangeya, the Best of Bharatas, has instructed me to rescue you at any cost.'

Dvaipaayana's disciples were soon transferred to the royal boat, which was then anchored.

When Krivi's boat came up to the landing ground of Godhuli, there was a commotion among the tribesmen. Some pointed their fingers at the boat. A couple of them went to fetch Mosa. Soon the new Chief came down to the river and stood looking at Krivi's boat and at the Muni with a malevolent look.

Krivi, the boatman, and his sons uttered a weird scream, knelt and bent their heads in obeisance. Mosa replied by shouting an order that Krivi must not bring the boat to the bank.

Mosa was a short, broad-chested, dark-hued man, with red-painted eyelids which gave him a fierce look. He wore brass rings suspended from his ears, and also a headgear with the horns of a buffalo to indicate that he was the chief of the tribe, the representative of Mahishaasura, the Buffalo God.

Dvaipaayana clambered from the boat into knee-deep water. Mosa, by a gesture, asked him to stay where he was and issued orders to the tribesmen standing near him to get ready to shoot at the stranger.

'My blessing, redoubtable Mosa,' said Dvaipaayana, extending his hand in blessing, with an irresistible smile on his face.

The smile only irritated the Chief. He shouted : 'Who are you ?'

'Your father was always kind to me from the time I was a five-year-old boy. I met him only a few months ago when I came to Godhuli,' said the Muni.

'But who are you ?' asked the Chief, stamping his foot.

The Muni smiled indulgently. 'Have you heard of Pangu Muni ?' he asked.

'I have heard about the lame Muni who was killed by wolves. But what have you got to do with him ?' asked Mosa.

'I am the son of Pangu Muni and a disciple of Acharya

Gautama. I lived here for many years and have been visiting here now and again.'

Mosa laughed as if it was a great joke. 'It makes no difference to me whether you are the son of the lame Muni or a Muni with both legs. Don't come out of the river. If you do, I will let my arrow fly.' Saying so, he took the bow which was suspended from his left shoulder and picked an arrow from the quiver. 'Why have you come here ?' he asked.

'I cam here because this is my home. Acharya Gautama was my *guru* and I lived as his son. Where is he ? I want to pay my respects to him,' said the Muni.

Mosa again laughed contemptuously and pointed at the cinders and the smoking heap of ashes. 'Find him out among the ashes.'

'Where are the others ?'

'I wish I knew,' replied Mosa.

'Redoubtable Chief, you have burnt down the *ashram*. Is not that so ?' asked the Muni.

'Yes, I did. And now get into your boat and don't let me see your face again.'

'But, noble Chief,' said the Muni, 'why are you so angry with the inmates of the *ashram* ? Last year when I was here, your noble father was on very friendly terms with Acharya Gautama.' He again smiled. Mosa's conceit was aroused; he could not leave the last word to the Muni.

'I am not my father,' remarked Mosa, again with a snarl. 'And I don't care what my father did or thought. But I will not permit you people—as my father did—to entice away the young women of the people of Mahishaasura, the Buffalo God.'

'Acharya Gautama's wife, mother Sharmi, has been like a mother to me. She came from your tribe. She was very happy. She loved everybody who came to her and all the men of the *ashram* respected her. She played hostess to the *Srotriya* kings and chiefs when for 17 days the *Vajpeya* was held in Dharmakshetra,' said the Muni.

The Muni was trying to advance, but Mosa shouted : 'Stay where you are. Don't try to come near me. You talk of Sharmi. She is a wicked woman, a great enemy of the people of the Buffalo God. She used to decoy our young women to the *ashram* and get them married to its inmates.'

'What was wrong about that ? All the girls married to the inmates of the *ashram* were very happy,' said the Muni.

'Happy ! They were venomous. They came to our tribal village and taught many of our women to be unruly and hate our ways.'

'Then, let me take the unruly women of the *ashram* if you do not want them,' said the Muni.

'No. I want them to be punished in such a horrible manner that no woman will dare to act against the tribal law. Now, you had better go away; otherwise....' shouted Mosa.

Krupa, the senior Elder of the tribe and Sharmi's father, whom Dvaipaayana knew very well, without casting a glance of recognition at him, approached Mosa, fell on his knees and bent his head to the ground. Having paid due respect, he carried on a whispered conversation with Mosa.

After Krupa stepped aside, Mosa turned to Dvaipaayana. 'The respected Elder, my uncle, says that what you say is true. You came here every year. You also brought here the dead body of Pangu Muni and set fire to his funeral pyre. The Elder,' and he pointed to Krupa, 'also says that my father was very fond of you and used to invite you to the tribal dinner.'

'That is true. That is why I want you to be friendly with me.'

Mosa again had whispered conversation with Krupa and then turned to Dvaipaayana. 'Uncle Krupa says that you are worshipped as a God by the people of the *ashram*. Now I want you to worship Mahishaasura, the Divine Buffalo. You can come up.'

Then Mosa addressed Krivi, the boatman : 'Krivi, you keep your boat here till I tell you to go on your usual rounds.' Then, turning to the tribesmen, he said : 'Give food to Krivi and his sons.'

Krivi fell at his feet and saluted him by kissing the ground before him.

When Dvaipaayana approached the Chief, he asked : 'Will you give me the dead body of my *guru*, the venerable Acharya Gautama ? I should like to offer him appropriate obsequies.'

'Did you expect me to preserve his dead body ?' asked Mosa. 'Part of it is here,' he said with a loud laugh and slapped his stomach. 'His bones have been thrown into the river.'

'But I understood that your noble father was opposed to eating human flesh,' said the Muni.

The Chief laughed proudly. 'Don't remind me about my father. He was a traitor. He betrayed the Buffalo God by dealing with the *ashram* in a friendly way. He prohibited serving human flesh at the tribal dinner when you or Acharya Gautama had been invited, but I want every one to eat it. It is only by eating the flesh of men that their spirit and courage enter one's body. I shall get you to eat it too, now that you are my guest.'

Dvaipaayana smiled and said : 'Try. Where are mother Sharmi and the other women of the *ashram* ?'

'Sharmi ! She and the other women of our tribe are quite safe where they are. Don't hope to see them again. If Sharmi had not been the daughter of our uncle, I would have cut her into a hundred pieces. She is responsible for the whole trouble,' said Mosa with an emphatic nod of his horns.

Mosa, with a few tribesmen, started for his tribal headquarters ordering Dvaipaayana to follow him. The Muni had no other alternative; he was surrounded by eight or nine tribesmen, each with a spear in his hand, ready to kill him if he made the slightest effort to escape. There was no escape, as he could see.

By about noon, the whole party, following forest trails, arrived at the tribal headquarters.

Then Mosa stopped and turned to Dvaipaayana. 'My uncle tells me that you can foretell the future and provide a cure for ailments.'

'I can, if you have faith in the WORD,' said the Muni.

'What is this WORD ? Where does it live ?' asked Mosa.

'It lives in the mouth of eminent *Srotriyas* like Acharya Gautama, whom you killed.'

'Does it live in your mouth also ?' asked Mosa in a mocking tone.

'I think it does,' replied the Muni.

'Let me hear it,' said the Chief.

'You can hear it only when you are pure, and freed from murderous frenzy.'

The Chief glared at the Muni. 'You mean to say that I am impure ? You dare to tell me—the descendant of the mighty, divine Buffalo—that I am a sinner ? I will chop your head off.'

Dvaipaayana laughed as if he was enjoying a joke.

'What are you laughing at ?' asked the Chief.

'I am laughing at your wrong-headedness. You have burnt the Acharya; the WORD lived in his mouth. How can you hear it now ?'

'You are alive. You can let me know what the WORD is,' said Mosa. 'My uncle, Krupa, says that he has seen you working miracles on ailing people and your blessings have brought welfare to many.'

'I did not do that, it was the WORD that worked the miracle

—the WORD which can be recited in the presence of a sinner only when invoking the wrath of the Gods on him.'

'You again call me a sinner !' shouted Mosa angrily.

Dvaipaayana looked at him unperturbed. 'What else are you ? You have burnt down the *ashram*, killed one of the eminent *Srotriyas*, taken away the cattle dedicated to the *ashram* and forcibly removed the women. You yourself told me that you have eaten the flesh of my *guru*.'

Mosa glared at Dvaipaayana for some time. He was not accustomed to being spoken to in this manner. 'I will throttle you here and now if you do not let me know what the WORD is like.' And he made a gesture with his fingers as if they were the claws of an eagle.

'Every time you open your lips, you want to do something to me, but not all your threats will make me chant the life-giving WORD.'

'Let us see. I will have to decide tomorrow whether you are to live or die,' said Mosa.

They came to a spot enclosed by a thick hedge of thorny plants, guarded by two tribesmen with spears. Under the orders of the Chief, they barred the entry to the enclosure.

The two guards, under the orders of Mosa, told Dvaipaayana to go into the enclosure. As he was doing so, the Chief said : 'I will see you tomorrow. I want to know what the WORD is. If you persist in witholding it from me, I shall pull your tongue out.'

Dvaipaayana looked at the Chief and laughed. 'Even if you cut my throat or pull my tongue out, re-doubtable Chief, you will not hear even a single syllable of the blessed WORD, unless you have become pure or the Gods want to condemn you for your misdeeds.'

Mosa flared up. 'You have said that twice. If you say it again, I will cut your throat here and now.'

There was an amused twinkle in Dvaipaayana's eyes. 'Evidently you are trying to make up your mind how to kill me. Who prevents you from doing it here and now ? I am ready. Why do you hesitate ?'

The Chief was baffled. 'I will not do it just now because you want me to do it. I will do it when I wish.'

'Then, Chief, come to me when you are ready to kill me. Don't forget one thing : You can kill me. To kill a *Srotriya*—who lives in *tapas*, austere self-discipline, and dedicated to the WORD—is the greatest sin that one can commit. The Gods will never forgive you, for in a *Srotriya's* mouth alone lives the WORD, which is eternal and all-powerful. And the curse of a *Srotriya* will destroy you and your people.'

'Don't irritate me further,' shouted Mosa. 'It is now time for me to get ready for the tribal dinner. I will see you tomorrow. Now go inside and make friends with some of your people.'

'May the Gods give you better sense tomorrow,' said the Muni and stepped into the enclosure.

The guards closed the opening. Mosa gave them strict orders : 'If you see this man trying to get away, kill him on the spot.'

It was well-nigh evening then and Dvaipaayana turned his eyes towards the five young men who were squatting at the other end of the enclosure. They saw the opening and closing of the gap and thought that some tribesmen had come to kill them. They got up and came towards Dvaipaayana.

Suddenly one of them tore himself away from the group, rushed towards Dvaipaayana and fell at his feet. 'Father !' he exclaimed.

'My son !' exclaimed Dvaipaayana, and raising Shuka, gathered him to himself in an embrace, breathing in the scent of his hair by way of blessing.

CHAPTER 28

THE MANDATE OF THE GODS

RECOGNISING the Muni, the other young men also came rushing up to him and fell at his feet, each one receiving an embrace from him.

Though it was dark, the Muni could see, with delight, when his arms received his son, that Shuka had grown tall and muscular.

'What has brought you here, Father ?' asked Shuka.

'I came to Gcdhuli to take you to Hastinapur,' replied the Muni. 'But tell me why *you* are here ; that is more important for the moment.'

'You know that Mosa hated his father, who had interned him in a small settlement in the forest; he was never permitted to come to the tribal headquarters. No sooner had he been installed as tribal Chief than he sent a demand to the venerable Acharya to surrender all the women of the tribe, including mother Sharmi. The Acharya declined to surrender them,' said Shuka.

'And rightly,' said the Muni. 'What grievance could Mosa have ? All of them had been married to the inmates of the *ashram* with the consent of their parents and the old Chief, Poppa; most of them had been happily married for years and had children and had completely taken to Arya ways. What happened next?'

Shuka continued : 'The next day, Mosa came with about a hundred tribesmen, surrounded the *ashram*, set fire to it and killed the venerable Acharya—and even the children; mother Sharmi and the women-folk of the *ashram* who came from his tribe, were brought to the tribal headquarters driven by whip-lashes like cattle. Some inmates of the *ashram* ran away to the Field of Ashes. After reducing the *ashram* to ashes, they killed a few *Srotriyas* and had a hearty feast. The reason why we were kept alive, I think, was that they wanted our flesh to serve as a delicacy at the tribal dinner.'

Pointing to the setting sun, the Muni said : 'It is time for us to perform the evening ritual, but we cannot perform it without a bathe. However let us pray to the Gods silently to give us faith to face our trials.'

The five young men, all in the stage of Brahmacharya, joined Dvaipaayana in silent meditation.

Suddenly the silence was broken by the sounds of drums and horns. Shouts of victory were heard. The tribesmen appeared to have assembled at the community meeting place. Shortly after, the rhythm of the sound showed that they had begun to dance to the accompaniment of the drums and horns.

It was a dark, moonless night, and as soon as the tribal gathering got into full swing, they heard the notes of a peacock.

'Father, it is mother Sharmi calling,' said Shuka.

'Mother Sharmi ?' exclaimed the Muni.

'The food served to us has been either human flesh or beef, and we could not take either; so we decided to go without food. Yesterday, at midnight, mother Sharmi and some other women of the *ashram* who had been brought here by Mosa—all of them daughters or sisters of one or other of the Elders—passed us food through a gap in the thorn hedge at the other end of the enclosure. They have come today also for the same purpose.'

When they went to the other end of the enclosure, Sharmi passed the food to the young men through the little gap in the hedge.

'Mother Sharmi, Father is here,' said Shuka to Sharmi.

'I seek your blessing, Mother Sharmi,' said the Muni.

'Krishna, my son, how do you come to be here?' asked Sharmi. In moments of excitement, she only saw him as the motherless boy who had been brought up by her. Seeing the Muni there, she suddenly remembered what she had lost. 'Krishna,' she said in a voice charged with emotion, 'your *guru* and my children were all killed before my eyes. Evil days have come upon me'.

'Mother, don't weep over the past, particularly at this moment. The Gods have brought your Krishna to meet you,' said the Muni in an affectionate tone. 'Listen. Krivi's boat is waiting for me at the Godhuli landing ground. The royal boat is near the Field of Ashes, with the Minister, Kunik, in charge. We can easily make this gap a little wider to enable the boys to get through. How many women are willing to escape in the way I suggest ?'

'All of us here now, and some others too,' replied Sharmi and added: 'Here Mosa is sure to make a living hell for them; their noses and breasts may be cut off. The younger ones will be handed over to the most brutish of the tribesmen. But how can our women who have pledged themselves before the sacred fire to remain loyal to their lords, ever live with other men? I hear that I shall be cut to pieces. With the Acharya gone, my children killed and the *ashram* reduced to ashes, I have nothing to live for.'

'You have to live not only for the women who were married into the *ashram* under your advice, but for us also. Go and collect as many women as are willing to escape, and with these boys, run for Godhuli *ashram* for whatever you are worth,' said the Muni.

'Krishna, we will do as you want us to, but I would like to die in my *ashram*,' said Sharmi. 'Take this food, boys. I will speak to the other women,' she said and handed over the basket of fruits, roots and nuts to Shuka.

'Go and collect your friends as soon as possible,' said the Muni.

'I will be back very soon', said Sharmi and faded into the darkness.

'Father, are you not coming with us?' asked Shuka.

'No, my son,' replied the Muni. 'The Gods must have some purpose in view; otherwise they would not have brought me here. You had better go.' Then he added: 'Your mother is in great distress at your not coming to Hastinapur to found a home. She has already selected Shaunak's daughter as your bride.'

'I want to be a Brahmachari all my life or become an ascetic (sannyasi) by renouncing the world,' said Shuka.

The Muni patted Shuka on the back. 'This is not the time to think of these matters. The first thing is: you must reach the royal boat as fast as you can. You had better eat the food brought by mother Shaımi.'

The young men took their food; the Muni would not.

They waited impatiently for the shrill note of the peacock. About midnight the note was heard.

'Here comes mother Sharmi. I will keep back the thorns with this bamboo, boys. Crawl through this gap as fast as you can,' said the Muni. 'Are all the eleven women going to come with you?' he asked Sharmi.

'Yes—and two or three others also; they had been in close touch with the *ashram* and liked the happy way in which we lived,' replied Sharmi. 'Bal-Muni, are you not coming with us?'

'No, Mother. I cannot come,' replied the Muni.

'But Mosa will kill you.'

'If the Gods have decided that I must be killed by Mosa, how can I defy them?' replied the Muni with a smile. 'Don't waste your time talking. The guards may come to suspect that something unusual is going on here.'

Sharmi laughed. 'The guards are asleep; they are filled with wine; at any rate, they have covered their eyes with their hands and will only remove them after we have left the headquarters.'

'Mother Sharmi, you are a great schemer and intriguer in spite of your white hair,' said the Muni, trying to keep her spirits alive. 'Will you be able to find your way in the darkness through the forest?'

'One of my brothers, who knows the trails very well, is waiting for us on the outskirts of the village,' replied Sharmi.

'Whatever happens, you must reach the royal boat before the sun rises tomorrow,' said the Muni. Then he turned to Shuka: 'Shuka, your mother is waiting for you at Hastinapur. Tell her in my name that I have adopted all the women in the Paraashara *gotra*. Mother Sharmi will somehow manage to get good husbands for those who are unmarried.'

Shuka and the young men fell at the Muni's feet. 'It breaks my heart to leave you alone,' said Shuka.

'No. The WORD has to be preserved and protected. You are a young man; you can do it much better than I can. But remember my advice: No man can ever be happy who cannot make his mother happy too,' said the Muni and patted Shuka.

After the boys and the women had left, the Muni prayed to the Gods to give them protection.

This providential escape had given the women a new zest and gave wings to their feet. Sharmi's brother was waiting for them when they reached the outskirts of the village. The women and the boys made themselves into an unbreakable chain by holding hands so that no one would be lost on the way, and though the night was dark, they did not have much difficulty in finding their path.

In the morning, there appeared to be a volcanic eruption in the settlement: loud, angry shouts, running foot-steps, the sound of people talking in high-pitched excitement, and the blowing of horns summoning the tribe to face a grave danger. Very soon there was a commotion near the prison-camp.

The opening of the prison-camp was cleared of thorns. Mosa came in, his eyes red, wielding a bufallo's thigh-bone as a mace. With two of his lieutenants, he went round the enclosure, but there was no trace of the young men.

He rushed at Dvaipaayana who was sitting on the ground. The Muni, by a gesture, asked Mosa to stay his hand. 'Why are you so angry ?' he asked him.

Mosa glared at him and shouted : 'Where have the others gone ?'

The Muni looked up quietly with a twinkle of amusement in his eyes. 'Better ask your guards,' he replied.

Mosa turned to the guards. They were kneeling before him with their heads in the dust, trembling for their very lives. 'Where are the other prisoners ?' Mosa shouted at them, hitting one with the mace.

'They must be here,' the other guard said. 'We were awake the whole night and the five men were here when we closed the opening.'

He found that the food supplied to the Muni the previous night had remained untouched, and he shouted : 'Why didn't you take your food yesterday evening ?'

'I cannot pray to my Gods without taking a bathe, and unless I have prayed, I cannot take any food. And even as it is, most of it is beef; I will never touch that.'

'You won't eat what I give you ?' asked Mosa; his anger was rising, but he did not know how to give vent to it. 'You won't get any other food. I shall enjoy seeing you die of starvation.'

'Then I shall have grown so emaciated that you won't be able to feast on my flesh,' said the Muni with a smile.

Two or three of the Elders of the tribe, including Krupa, Sharmi's father, came running. 'Mighty Chief, son of the Divine Buffalo, a great calamity has befallen us,' said Krupa.

'What has happened to you ? Why are you wailing ?' asked Mosa.

'My daughter, Sharmi, has disappeared,' said Krupa. 'It must be the magic of these people.'

'Your daughter ! Sharmi !'

'Not only that', said another tribal Elder in an agitated voice. 'Oh, Great Buffalo King, my two daughters have also gone.'

Another Elder, placed in charge of the women of the *ashram*, came to salute Mosa and stood trembling before him.

'What is the matter with you ?' asked Mosa.

'All the women whom we brought here have disappeared from their homes, oh Buffalo King.'

Mosa turned ferociously towards the Muni and shouted : 'You blackguard, I know that this is your magic.' He then turned to one of the tribesmen who was loyal to him and said : 'Go to one of the experts in *Yatu vidya* (sorcery) and ask him to make counter sorcery.' Then he turned to the Muni : 'Where have your companions gone ?'

'I told you : ask your guards.'

Mosa turned to Krupa. 'Uncle, where can Sharmi have gone?'

'How am I to know ? When I saw that she was not there, I suspected foul-play and came straight to you,' said Krupa. 'The women who have been living in the *ashram* have always been unruly; they do not respect our tribal customs. One does not know what they are capable of doing with themselves. They may have drowned themselves in the river.'

One of the chiefs trusted by Mosa came running breathlessly. 'Great Chief, Incarnation of Mahishaasura.' He was out of breath and had to stop. 'Great Chief,' he said after a pause, 'your two sisters....'

Mosa turned to him, his eyes blazing with anger. 'What about them ?'

'They have disappeared.'

'What ? Disappeared ? Are you sure ?'

'Yes. I swear by the divine Mahishaasura.'

'Where can they have gone ?' asked Mosa.

'How do I know ?'

Mosa was so excited that he did not know what to say; his mouth was frothy. Then he turned to his favourite chiefs. 'All of you go in search of the women. Bring them to me at once, dead or alive.' Then he turned to the Muni. 'You wait till our sorcerers come. Why are you smiling—you wicked one, you enemy of the great Buffalo God ?'

The Muni could not help laughing and stood up. Mosa turned to him angrily. 'Why are you laughing ?'

'The Gods have given the mandate. You wanted to listen to the WORD. So, listen,' said the Muni, raising his hands to the heavens.

Mosa was transfixed at the sudden transformation of the Muni, whose face was like one inspired, his eyes aglow, his body tense, his voice sonorous, raised in a majestic chant.

"*O Omnipotent Lord, mighty Varuna,*
Who rules over the earth here and yonder broad sky,
With their frontiers far away,
O Lord, I, son of Muni Paraashara and great grandson of
Vasishtha, pray to Thee,
Grant me my prayers.
Oh, Mighty Lord,
Surround the unrighteous with a hundred snares.
Let him not escape Thy wrath,
O Thou, the Supreme observer of men.
He defies the sacred canons of Rita, *the Cosmic Order,*
arching life,
On which righteous living rests.
May his evil deeds be like fire-brands,
May the heavens surround him with fire—
This hater of righteous ways."

Suddenly, Mosa's younger brother came running, trembling with excitement, out of breath. 'Brother, brother, she has disappeared.'

'Who ?' asked Mosa.

'Your senior wife.'

The Elders of the tribe were awe-struck and looked at the Muni.

Mosa was no longer himself. He wanted to rush at the Muni, his mace uplifted, but Krupa held his hand in a tight grip.

Mosa shook himself free from the grip, flung his mace on the ground and ran as if for his life.

CHAPTER 29

AT THE TRIBAL HEADQUARTERS

BY the time the morning star rose, they—the thirteen women led by mother Sharmi and the five Brahmacharis—reached the landing ground at Godhuli. It was a trying experience walking, often at a running pace, over the forest trail; the women emerged from the ordeal with torn skirts and bleeding feet.

Sharmi patted her younger brother who served as their guide with affection and asked him to go back to the settlement at once lest his absence might be discovered and attract severe punishment at the hands of Mosa.

The women could not look at the spot where once they had lived happily. Sharmi bit her lips. She had lived there almost a lifetime happily with her beloved Acharya and her children and generations of cows. Now she had lost everything. But she realised that if she now surrendered to the urge to cry aloud, her younger companions would lose courage to face the grim situation.

The two tribal guards were sleeping under the shade of a tree. Krivi and his sons were also asleep on the bank of the river near the place where their boat was grounded.

Mother Sharmi grasped Krivi's shoulders and shook him. 'Krivi, get up and make the boat ready. We are going in your boat.'

'You are Mother Sharmi ?' asked Krivi, sitting up, still believing that it was a dream.

'Yes, I am Mother Sharmi.' She twisted his ear till he cried in pain.

'Oh, Buffalo God, have mercy on poor old Krivi. I agree that you are Mother Sharmi,' said Krivi.

'Then, get your boat ready. We want you to take us to the royal boat,' said Sharmi, relaxing the pressure on the boatman's ear.

'The royal boat ! Have you all escaped from the settlement ?' asked Krivi.

'Bal-Muni has asked you to take us to the royal boat before the sun rises,' said Sharmi.

Krivi was awake now. 'But where is Bal-Muni ?'

'He is in the prison-camp of the settlement. He has asked us to escape from the settlement. Don't waste time.'

'But how can I take you ? The Son of the Divine Buffalo God had ordered me to stay here,' said Krivi helplessly.

'Look here. We are all escaping from death or worse, mutilation. If you don't take us now, all of us will drown ourselves in Mother Yamuna. We don't want to go back.'

'But where is Bal-Muni ?' repeated Krivi.

Shuka intervened. 'Krivi, the venerable Father has left himself in the hands of the Gods. You have to take us in your boat immediately. Father has instructed us to go to Hastinapur.'

Krivi's two sons were awake by then and came up to Krivi.

'I am an unfortunate man,' said Krivi, beating his forehead. Then he continued piteously : 'If I take you in my boat, our Chief will kill me and my sons. If I don't, I will be cursed by all of you, and also by the Bal-Muni.'

'Well, then,' said Shuka and patted Krivi on the back. 'Get along and take us to the royal boat.'

As dawn broke, the head boatman of the royal boat saw Krivi's boat coming with several women and Brahmacharis and drew the attention of the Minister, Kunik, who was standing knee-deep in the water of the river, performing the *sandhya* along with the disciples who were transferred to the royal boat, and also the Dhanurdhars, the *kshatriya* archers. The rowers were also taking their bathe in the river.

The Minister, Kunik, was surprised when he saw Krivi's boat coming with its human cargo and was shocked to see that the Master was not there.

As the boat was grounded on the improvised landing ground, Mother Sharmi and the other women jumped out of it. The younger women were so tired that they stretched themselves out on the bank of the river, half-dazed.

'Minister Kunik,' Sharmi accosted Kunik as she approached him. Her skirt was torn. Her breast scarf was no more than a strip. The Minister, Kunik, stared at the partially unveiled feminine abundance standing before him.

Sharmi shouted at him : 'Why do you stare at me as if I were a beautiful *apsara* from the heavens ? I am old enough to be your grand-mother. It seems that you have forgotten Mother Sharmi. Have you eyes to see that we have been running over the forest trails; look at our bleeding feet and torn skirts ?'

The Minister, Kunik, felt the remark like a whip-lash and it was some time before he could look at Sharmi. 'But Mother Sharmi, how did you come here ? I thougt that all of you had been killed or taken prisoners by Mosa,' he said.

Mother Sharmi, with her hands placed defiantly on her hips, said : 'I am tired of explaining everything to everybody. We were taken to the tribal headquarters and would have been killed or mutilated. Bal-Muni came to our rescue. He told us to escape to Godhuli and take Krivi's boat and come to the royal boat. You are to take us to Hastinapur.'

'Come and sit down here on the bank for a while,' said the Minister, Kunik. 'Mother Sharmi, did you meet the Master yourself?'

Seeing a look of distrust on the face of the Minister, Kunik, Shuka intervened : 'Minister Kunik, Father is in Mosa's prison-camp. He instructed us to escape and come to you. He himself would not come. He has left his fate to the Gods.'

The Muni's disciples, who had been transferred to the royal boat under his instructions, came and joined them.

'But why didn't you bring the Master with you?' asked Kunik, still not able to understand the situation fully.

'You have forgotten, Minister Kunik, what Bal-Muni is like,' said Sharmi. 'All the elephants of Hastinapur could not have moved him to change his decision.'

'But he must have been killed by now,' said Kunik.

'Yes, we know. There is no chance of saving him from the brutal Mosa,' said Sharmi, disgusted at Kunik's scepticism and added : 'And there is no chance of your escaping Mother Sharmi if you don't act as you should.' Not for nothing had she, as a hostess, dominated the arrangements in Dharmakshetra when the *Vajpeya* was performed.

The Minister, Kunik, saw that the situation was very difficult. 'Sit down, Krivi. You and your sons can join us. We will provide you with some food.'

Shuka intervened. 'We will keep to our vows. We Brahmacharis will offer worship to the God Surya, perform the *sandhya* and worship the sacred fire, then partake of whatever food you can give us.'

The boatmen served food to the fugitives. Mother Sharmi could not swallow even a morsel of it; her mind was oppressed with confused memories of Acharya, her children, her *ashram*, even of her Krishna who must have been killed under Mosa's orders.

Shuka was standing by her side. 'Mother Sharmi, forget the past. We have to build a future,' he said. She piteously looked at his face and between sobs bewailed his fate : 'My Acharya is gone, my children are all gone, "my Krishna" is gone. I have nobody but you to look after me in my old age.'

Shuka bent down and forgetting his vow not to touch a woman, embraced Mother Sharmi. 'Mother Sharmi, don't worry. I am here. Why do you forget that ?'

'You are the only one left to me,' she said and clung to his legs.

Shuka gathered her hands affectionately in his arms and said : 'You must not succumb to despair. The Gods are with us and I love to see the sacred fire burning bright in the Godhuli *ashram*. I am sure the Gods won't deny you happiness. Don't lose faith.'

For a few moments Mother Sharmi cried. Soon she was her old self. She pulled herself up, and wiped her tears away with the back of her hand.

After she recovered her composure, she turned to the Minister, Kunik. 'Minister Kunik, let us start for Hastinapur as early as possible.'

The Minister, Kunik, shook his head. 'Mother Sharmi, it is not so easy for me to do what you say. I have to consider the commands of the Best of Bharatas, the noble Prince Gangeya. He has asked me to see that no harm comes to the Master. Tell me all that Mosa has done.'

Shuka, at the request of Mother Sharmi, told him all that had happened to the *ashram* and its inmates; how Acharya Gautama and his children had been killed; how the women of the *ashram* had been driven like cattle to the tribal headquarters. 'Now Father has sacrificed himself for the sake of all of us,' he concluded.

'That makes me think twice before returning to Hastinapur,' said the Minister, Kunik. 'I am in duty bound to take steps to save the Master or punish whoever has killed him.'

'But we have received instructions from Bal-Muni—the "Master" as you call him—that we must be taken to Hastinapur,' said Sharmi.

'That is all right. But what about the commands of the noble Gangeya ? I am a Minister of Hastinapur and have been commissioned to rescue the Master,' said the Minister Kunik.

'How will you do that ? He must have been killed by now,' said Sharmi.

'I am now taking the royal boat to the Godhuli landing ground,' replied Kunik. 'Burning the *ashram* and killing the *Srotriyas*, including the venerable Acharya, is a challenge to the authority of the Best of Bharatas, who has pledged himself to protect *dharma* and punish those who seek to destroy it. I cannot forget that aspect,' added Kunik.

'How can we go to Hastinapur ?' asked Sharmi.

'That will have to wait,' said Kunik. He continued : 'Yesterday I ordered three boatmen who were plying their own crafts, to come here and join me. Mother Sharmi, with the women and the Brahmacharis, will stay in those crafts. Krivi too will come with me.'

'Oh, I will be killed by Mosa,' said Krivi and beat his forehead.

'Don't worry about your life, Krivi,' said the Minister, Kunik. 'You are too old, not worth killing. You have to show us the way. But if you play us false, you will meet your death instantaneously.'

'As the master pleases,' said Krivi and bowed low before Kunik. 'I have already obeyed the orders of the Bal-Muni conveyed to me by Mother Sharmi and offended Mosa. I cannot go back to him, having disobeyed his orders. So I have to help you.'

'That is talking sense,' said Kunik. He then turned to Sharmi: 'Mother Sharmi, the other women and the Brahmacharis will stay here in the small boats under the charge of two rowers and two archers whom I am leaving here. That is quite enough. The rest will come with me.'

'Nothing of the kind,' said Mother Sharmi, who was now her old self. 'If you are going to restore the *ashram* or rescue Bal-Muni, I must be there. I am his mother.' She would never forget that as Mother Sharmi, her primary duty was to maintain order among those who came her way, all of whom she treated as unruly children.

Kunik remonstrated : 'You will only come in our way if there is a fight.'

Again she placed her hands on her hips, which was with her a posture of authority, and said : 'I owe that to my lord, the Acharya, and my children, one of whom was already a twice-born. I will come with you, whatever happens, Minister Kunik. We must rescue Bal-Muni or see that those who killed him are punished. Bal-Muni and Shuka are the only two children left to me.' Then, for a moment, her grief overcame her and, in spite of her defiant posture, her eyes were filled with tears. Shuka placed his hand on her back. Again she clung to him, suppressed her sobs and gathered composure.

'I have got a feeling, Mother Sharmi, that the Gods will not allow Father to be killed,' said Shuka. 'He has had a charmed life throughout and *dharma* depends upon his survival. We Brahmacharis will come with you, Minister Kunik.'

One of the Master's disciples came forward and said : 'We are willing to come with you, noble Minister. We cannot abandon our *guru.*'

'All right, all right. Then all the women, the Brahmacharis and the disciples shall go in the three crafts, which will be in tow of the royal boat and in your boats till I clear the *ashram* grounds of the tribesmen. I only want fighting men to come with me,' said Kunik.

'But you are few and they will be many,' said Sharmi.

'Don't worry, Mother Sharmi,' said Kunik with a smile. 'The *dhanurdhars*—the archers—whom I have brought, are seasoned warriors, the best in Hastinapur. They can take care of themselves. All the rowers, except two, will also come with me with their spears. Well, let us go to the Godhuli *ashram.*'

The royal boat then moved towards Godhuli.

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CHAPTER 30

MOSA INVOKES THE DIVINE BUFFALO

WHEN the royal boat arrived at the landing ground of Godhuli, the archers with their formidable bows and the rowers with their spears, jumped out of it. Seeing the archers and the rowers, the two guards posted at the *ashram* ground, ran away into the jungle. The women and the Brahmacharis, when Kunik told them to, clambered out of the three crafts.

The Minister, Kunik, ordered four of his rowers, armed with spears, to be in charge of the *ashram*. He then turned to the women and the Brahmacharis: 'All of you stay here.'

'Yes, we will stay here, ' said Sharmi. 'We will clean up the *ashram* ground and make it ready for installing the sacred fire. But don't you return without Bal-Muni.'

Kunik turned to Krivi. 'Krivi, now show us the way to the tribal headquarters, the shortest.'

'Mosa will murder me,' whimpered the old man and cried like a little child.

Kunik looked at him menacingly and gave him a buffet. 'Mosa will kill you tomorrow, but I will kill you just now if you don't show us the way to the tribal headquarters,' he said.

'All right, all right,' said Krivi. 'Mosa will kill me if I take you there. You will kill me if I don't take you. Everybody is busy trying to kill me. But what will happen to my poor boys ?'

'Nothing will happen to them nor to you if you obey my orders,' said Kunik. 'Come along. Show us the way.'

Krivi, though anticipating death at any moment, led the Kuru warriors along the trails to the tribal headquarters.

When they arrived at the settlement, Krivi, without saying a word or even looking at Kunik, turned round and ran back to Godhuli. Life was dear to him; he wanted to face neither Mosa nor Kunik.

When Kunik saw some tribesmen standing at a distance, he ordered one of the archers to let fly an arrow at them. The warrior took an arrow out of his quiver, fixed it on the bow string and let it fly. The arrow hit its aim; a tribesman fell to the ground, uttering piteous cries. His companions fled away.

Under Kunik's orders, all the archers blew a terrible blast on their conchs.

There was panic in the settlement. Drums were beaten, horns blown, signalling danger. Women and children hid themselves away. The tribesmen came out of their huts and ran towards the meeting ground, but long before they reached it, Kunik had taken possession of it. Never had the tribesmen seen such powerful arrows and spears. They stood at a safe distance, oppressed by fear.

As Kunik and the warriors blew their conchs again, the forest reverberated with the blast. One of them who knew the tribal speech, stepped forward and in the name of the Best of Bharatas, Prince Gangeya, the Terrible, called upon them to hand over their Chief, Mosa, and to produce Muni Dvaipaayana, the Master, whom he had kidnapped; if the orders were not obeyed, said the announcer, their settlement would be destroyed and every tribesman killed.

Quite a few tribesmen who were followers of Mosa slipped away to hide themselves in the jungle.

Krupa, the leading Elder of the tribe, in the absence of Mosa officiating as Chief, came forward and accosted Kunik, folding his hands, and said in the speech of the Ayras which he had learnt during his contact with the *ashram*: 'Valiant Chief, I am the father of Sharmi. Wait a little. I shall go and fetch the revered Master.'

Kunik felt relieved; the Master was safe. 'If you deceive me,' he said, stepping nearer, ' I will kill every one of you. '

Kunik and his warriors waited for Krupa to return with the Master; so did the tribesmen who stood where they were silently.

Led by Krupa, the Master came up with his boyish smile playing around his lips and an amused twinkle in his eyes. 'Minister Kunik, why did you take the trouble to come here ?' he asked. ' I needed no one but the Gods to keep me alive. The *brahma-tej* has done its work. Remove your arrows from your bowstrings.'

Kunik prostrated himself before the Master; so did the archers. The Master blessed them, his right hand extended, and said: 'May you live a hundred years and may peace descend on the sons of the Divine Buffalo. Put back your arrows and put down your bows and spears on the ground. Krupa, ask your people also to do the the same.'.

The Kuru warriors, at a glance from Kunik, laid their weapons on the ground. Krupa ordered the tribesmen to do likewise.

'Noble Krupa,' said the Master, 'we must have a tribal dinner. Call the children also; they will be hungry.'

'But where is Mosa ?' asked Kunik.

'He has shut himself up in the shrine of the Divine Buffalo,' said the Master with a laugh.

'Hiding himself !' exclaimed Kunik. 'He burnt down the Godhuli *ashram*, killed the *Stotriyas* including Acharya Gautama and kidnapped you, Master. I have orders to mete out severe punishment to Mosa and his tribesmen who have committed these misdeeds.'

'Minister Kunik,' said the Master, 'he has been punished by the Gods, and the tribesmen. I will also disown him.'

The leading Elders of the tribe nodded assent to the Master's statement.

'But how is he punished ?' asked Kunik.

'His senior wife ran away with Mother Sharmi,' replied the Master. 'According to the tribal custom, as the valiant Krupa tells me, the Chief is the master of all the women-folk, particularly of his wives, and the senior of them is looked upon as the symbol of his authority.' Kunik laughed aloud and remarked: 'That she left him was a disgrace which he could not face, could he ? '

'No ', said the Master, 'unable to bear the humiliation, he has sought refuge in the shrine of the Divine Buffalo.'

The Master smiled. 'Prayers will not do him any harm; they will teach him humility, which he badly needs.'

' I wish to see him,' said Kunik. 'The Best of Bharatas has commanded that he shall be put to death.'

'Kunik, don't worry about Mosa. Krupa is now the tribal Chief. Before you came, the tribesmen decided to go down to Godhuli and rebuild the *ashram*, didn't they, Krupa ?' asked the Master.

' That is so, Master, ' replied Krupa.

' In obedience to the commands of the Best of Bharatas, I have to deal with the tribal Chief,' asserted Kunik.

' What do you propose to do ?' asked the Master.

' To teach a lesson to the Chief,' replied Kunik. 'I must see him first.'

The Master turned to Krupa: 'Take us to the shrine, noble Krupa.'

' He won't see you, ' said Krupa. 'He has shut himself in the shrine, where the sacred buffalo, which represents the Divine Buffalo on earth, is worshipped. He has also the sorcerer of the tribe with him.'

'Don't worry about the sorcerer; we shall deal with him when we find him,' said Kunik.

Led by Krupa, the Master, the Minister Kunik, and the four archers accompanied by the elders of the tribe, went to the shrine which was situated on a hill in the centre of the settlement. It was a large hut with bamboo walls and enclosed by three concentric hedges of thorns. It housed the buffalo worshipped as a representative of the Divine Buffalo on earth.

When they reached the outer-most hedge of the shrine, they saw a magic line in white drawn around it. Krupa looked at the Master and said: 'The tribal sorcerer has drawn the magic barrier around the shrine. We cannot cross it, for by doing so, we will invite the wrath of Mahishaasura.'

The Master smiled. 'If you are afraid of crossing the line, Kunik and myself will do so. We are under the protection of the Gods.'

The Minister, Kunik interrupted : 'Master, you need not take the trouble of coming. I will go into the shrine and drag Mosa out to receive the proper punishment for his misdeeds.' Then he turned to Krupa: 'What do you think he is doing in the shrine?'

'He is perhaps invoking the Divine Buffalo to bring back his senior queen so that he can present her as a sacrificial offering,' said Krupa.

'Let us first go in and see Mosa,' said the Master. 'Perhaps the shrine will provide a proper atmosphere to win him back to righteous living.'

CHAPTER 31

MOSA EXPIATES HIS SIN

KRUPA did not know what to do. He had loved the Bal-Muni since his boyhood; to this was added deep respect when he saw what a beneficial influence his visit to Godhuli *ashram* had exercised over the tribal life all along the banks of the Yamuna. He was moved to the core of his being when the Muni brought down the wrath of the Gods on Mosa whose hateful ways he had disliked all his life.

He was, therefore, ready to risk the displeasure of Mosa and possibly the wrath of the Divine Buffalo by taking the Bal-Muni to the shrine.

Krupa went to the other Elders who were standing a little distance away. They also stood in awe of the Bal-Muni. He held consultation with them. They could not but admire the way in which he had faced death, and also the way in which he had brought down the wrath of the Gods on Mosa.

They agreed with Krupa that Bal-Muni's wishes should be complied with.

Krupa then returned to the Master and said that they would accept his injunctions.

Krupa and the Elders, assisted by the archers, removed the barrier of thorns tied together by fibre ropes from the opening in the hedges.

The walls of the shrine were of bamboos knit together. Its door was closed from the inside.

The Master asked Mosa to open the gate of the shrine. No response was forthcoming. Under the Minister, Kunik's orders, the archers removed the barrier from the entrance.

It was a strange scene that met their eyes. A young buffalo, its face painted red, with glossy, black skin and carrying between his loins the attributes of generous fecundity—a thing of beauty—was chewing the grass placidly. It was tethered to a pole. All its legs were hobbled and fastened to pegs. It appeared to be uneasy; now and again it made futile attempts to shake itself free.

According to the tribal custom, when Mosa had been installed as the Chief of the tribe, the old buffalo that was worshipped in the shrine, was offered as a sacrifice, and this young one installed as the Divine Buffalo on Earth.

Mosa was kneeling before the divinity, his head placed on the ground. A short sword of copper and three spears with shining blades were by his side. Next to him sat the old sorcerer, his face painted red and his eyes closed, muttering magic charms.

The Minister, Kunik's hand went instinctively to the hilt of the sword which was suspended from his waist-band. The Master turned to him and said: 'Minister Kunik, don't try to kill the Chief. We must not convert a shrine into a slaughter-house.'

Then he turned to Mosa and in his most persuasive way added: 'Valiant Mosa, rise up. You will not recover your wife in this way. She is at the Godhuli *ashram* helping Mother Sharmi to re-build it.'

Mosa raised his head and turned his inflamed eyes on Krupa. "You traitor !"he said in a hoarse voice. 'You have helped Sharmi and the other women to escape. Sharmi also committed an inexpiable sin by decoying my senior wife. Now she is re-building the *ashram* which I destroyed.' He paused for a moment, controlled his anger, and continued : 'You, Krupa, have also broken your oath of obedience to me . You betrayed the Divine Buffalo; his wrath will pursue you to the end of your days.'

' The Divine Buffalo will soon burn you up as you stand. Our master of magic charms is invoking the curse of the Divine Buffalo on you.' Mosa became very excited, his voice was incoherent, his breast heaved, his hand clutched at the hilt of his sword which lay near him.

Krupa and the other Elders could not help shivering at the prospect of the wrath of the Divine Buffalo being directed against them.

Mosa raised his hands in prayer. 'Divine Buffalo on Earth, I am your son. Turn your wrath on all these people, destroy them.' Then he pointed at the Master and added: 'Particularly their sorcerer who pretends to be speaking for alien gods.'

They all waited. Nothing happened, except a deep bellow from the young buffalo. Then it lowered its head and began to chew the luscious grass. It seemed to enjoy its role as a divinity.

'Mosa, don't be foolish,' said the Master in an affectionate voice. 'You have committed a brutal act. You have burnt down the *ashram* and killed the *Srotriyas*, all of them harmless people. I want to be your friend. I want to help you if I can. I don't want any harm to come to you or your people.'

The Minister, Kunik, was impatient to discharge his duties and interrupted the Master by saying : 'The Best of Bharatas, Gangeya, Bheeshma the Terrible, has given me his command that Mosa must be punished.'

Mosa, his face blazing with anger, turned towards the Minister

Kunik. 'You dare punish me, the son of the Divine Buffalo !' Then he shouted : 'Leave here.'

The Master, by a gesture, asked Kunik to remain silent.

'Valiant Mosa, anger has never paid anybody and will not pay you,' said the Master. Then he bent down, selected a handful of green shoots of grass and offered them to the buffalo. The buffalo looked at the visitors with what another buffalo would have recognised as a smile.

Mosa saw the change in the buffalo. He got up and shouted at the buffalo : ' Divine Buffalo on Earth, destroy these wicked enemies of your people. They have entered your shrine without my permission. They have threatened me, your son. They deserve death.'

The Master stood patiently while Mosa invoked the Divine Buffalo. Then he smiled and said: 'Mosa, you have been sufficiently punished by the Gods. Your senior wife, the emblem of your power, has left you. I want you to forget the past. We will also forget how you desecrated the sacred fire of the *ashram*. We will pray to the Fire God to forgive your sacrilege.'

Mosa rolled his eyes as he impatiently listened to the words of the Master. With wild eyes reflecting fanaticism, he looked at the Master. 'You wicked sorcerer,' he shouted and brandished his hands to control the breathless excitement which had come over him.

The Master looked at him with indulgent eyes and slowly, in a low voice, said : ' Valiant Chief, you know that I am not a sorcerer, I am Dvaipaayana, the son of Muni Paraashara who departed for the land of the ancestors from Godhuli. The *ashram* is now a sacred place, a *tirtha*, where people come to worship the memory of my revered father.'

Then the Master bent down, picked up some grass and held it for the buffalo to chew. Mosa was shocked to see that the buffalo showed its appreciation of the Master by accepting grass from his hand—a privilege to which he, the Chief, alone was entitled.

Uncontrollable rage seized Mosa; his hands began to tremble. 'You, Divine Buffalo on Earth,' he shouted at the buffalo. 'You are also betraying me. You have become a friend of my enemy's.'

He was shaking in every limb. He took the sword, in one jump approached the buffalo and waved it over his head for some time. Then he gave forth a weird scream, took a step forward and with all the strength he possessed, thrust the sword into the buffalo's neck once, twice, three times.

The buffalo roared with pain. Blood gushed from its wounds and mouth. It made futile attempts to shake off the ropes to which its legs were tied. It tried to rear in a last attempt to get away, and sank on its legs, moaning piteously.

Mosa, sprayed with blood, his sword also dripping blood, turned to the sorcerer who was sitting there.

'You also have betrayed me, wicked sorcerer,' he shouted. ' You promised me that the Divine Buffalo would protect me from this wicked sorcerer. Here is what you deserve.' He thrust the sword into the sorcerer's chest.

Mosa then laughed like a mad man; with the sword uplifted, he rushed at the Master. The Minister, Kunik, and the archers caught hold of him. He struggled to free himself, but did not succeed. In blind fury and with blood-shot eyes, he looked at the sorcerer lying on the ground, his body bespattered with blood; death rattled in his throat.

Mosa's face was distorted in an ugly grimace. He tried to shake off Kunik and the archers, but could not. He was dragged a little farther away.

'Traitors, traitors, traitors,' he shouted almost incoherently. 'You, Divine Buffalo on Earth, whom I worshipped, you are a traitor. You, Uncle Krupa, are a traitor. You, sorcerer, have been a traitor. You elders are all cowards and traitors.' Then he stopped for breath. 'And my wife is a traitor too,' he shouted. 'And you, you wicked monster.' He started at the Master and added: 'I invoke the curse of the Divine Buffalo upon you, sorcerer, and upon all you traitors.'

By a supreme effort, he shook off the grip of the archers who were holding the hand with which he was grasping his sword. Before anyone could realise what he was going to do, he thrust it into his own chest.

Blood spurted out. He fell down dead.

CHAPTER 32

MOTHER SHARMI ASSUMES CHARGE

MOTHER Sharmi took charge of the mounds of ashes which were once the *ashram* of her lord, Acharya Gautama, and insisted on their removal. She hurried about, sometimes shedding tears for her Acharya and children who had been massacred on that spot; sometimes shouting at some lazy workers; sometimes laughing, or twisting the ear of someone, never forgetting the fact that as Mother Sharmi, she was the supieme dictator of the *ashram* and that the re-building of the *ashram* was her prime responsibility.

The inmates of the *ashram* who had escaped into the Field of Ashes, when Mosa burnt it down, had from time to time been sending two persons to watch the developments at Godhuli. Those on the watch were surprised when the royal boat arrived at Godhuli and Mother Sharmi returned in one of the three small crafts.

The watchers, afraid of being caught by Mosa's men, crept slowly towards the *ashram*, moving on all fours in the jungle grass or hiding behind trees. When they saw Mother Sharmi, the *brahmacharis* and the other disciples were cleaning up the *ashram* grounds, they felt confident that the *ashram* was not likely to be visited by Mosa.

Mother Sharmi's watchful eyes spotted the two ashramites and waved to them. She shouted : 'Rohit, you coward, how many of you are alive in the Field of Ashes ?'

Rohit and his companion emerged from behind a tree, and fell at Mother Sharmi's feet. 'Mother, eighteen of us are hiding in the Field of Ashes,' said Rohit.

' How many women ?' asked Sharmi.

' Five,' replied Rohit.

' You cowards,' said Sharmi. 'You preferred to live rather than die with the *ashram*. Even the heroism of the Acharya did not inspire courage in you; he was willing to die rather than live without the *ashram*. Never mind.. What has been done is done. It does not matter now. I forgive you. You are still children. Go and fetch all the others here.'

Before sunset, the disciples of the Master installed the sacred fire with proper rituals and appropriate chants. The sacred fire burnt high.

Before it was dark, the eighteen fugitives, including five women, arrived. They had had no food at all for several days; when the chief boatman of the royal boat brought food for them, Mother Sharmi told them: 'You cowards, you deserve to die. But I will forgive you. You cannot have had any food for days. But don't eat like wolves; otherwise you will fall ill.'

Two cows which had escaped when the *ashram* was burnt down, instinctively sensed that the danger was over and came to the *ashram* grounds. They waited a little distance away from the sacred fire. They had one eye on it; the other was on the forest trail by which, if there was danger, they could escape. Sharmi got up and called them. At first they stood still, but when they recognised that it was Mother Sharmi who was calling them, they came and stood by her. Sharmi affectionately threw arms around their necks.

In spite of the re-union at the *ashram* grounds, one anxious thought oppressed them all: Mosa must have certainly killed the Master before the Minister, Kunik reached the tribal headquarters.

An Elder of the tribe, with two tribesmen, emerged from the jungle. The royal archers got ready to shoot at them if they came near. Everybody had collected in a crowd, expecting a fight. Mother Sharmi shouted orders to the archers: 'Don't let them come near. But shoot at them only if they try to come near.'

The Elder of the tribe who heard this, raised both his hands. ' Mother Sharmi, we have come only to announce that the Master and the valiant Krupa, your father, are coming here tomorrow after the morning rituals are over.'

All present were electrified at this news. Mother Sharmi was transported with joy.

' Where is Mosa ?' she asked the Elder.

' The valiant Chief has been called away to the world of the Divine Buffalo', replied the Elder.

Two other Elders of the tribe, with some tribesmen, arrived immediately thereafter, bringing food with them.

All the persons in the *ashram* grounds retired to rest and went to sleep; not so Mother Sharmi, though she lay surrounded by the womenfolk. Whenever she closed her eyes, she saw her lord and her children standing before her. When they had been carried away by Mosa to the tribal headquarters, she had had to lash herself into furious action in order to forget the grief which oppressed her.

However, every time she remembered her husband and her children, she felt as if on the brink of collapse, but she was a brave woman. Her primary duty had been to save the kidnapped women from the anger of Mosa. Now her duty was to rebuild the *ashram* as her husband would have liked to do.

She could not sleep. When every woman in the ground had gone to sleep, she got up and went to the bank of the river, sat down and wept.

A piteous cry came from her heart. ' Oh, my Acharya, why did you leave me ? You have broken your promise to look after me till I die.'

She thanked the Gods for saving the life of her 'Krishna' and for the way in which the *ashram* was being re-built. She also thanked the Divine Buffalo whom she had worshipped before she married Acharya Gautama. She wanted no god to be angry for being neglected.

She had no idea how long she sat there. When her heart was unburdened, she came back to where she had been lying.

The next morning, after the morning rituals were over, offerings were made to the sacred fire by the *Srotriyas*. Soon they heard drums beating, flutes and fifes playing. Everyone rushed to the place where the forest trail ended.

The Master with a happy smile, Krupa, his face painted red as befitted the new Chief, and the Minister, Kunik, with a look of triumph, emerged from the forest, followed by tribesmen — the men carrying food and most of the women, with their children at their breast or riding on their hips, singing songs.

Mother Sharmi saw them coming and was beside herself with emotion. She parted the crowd. She must be the first to greet the new arrivals. In her haste, she almost forgot that her skirt was torn in places.

' Krishna, Krishna, my son,' she cried and fell at the Master's feet. The Master lifted her up. She forgot decorum, placed her hands around him, rested her head against his chest and broke into convulsive sobs. In broken accents, she said : 'My son, our Acharya is dead.'

The Master placed his hand on her white crown of hair. 'Mother Sharmi, the Acharya will never die,' he said. 'He will live in you, in me, in all his disciples and even in all the children of Mahishaasura.'

' My children, ' Sharmi uttered a moan.

' No, they are alive. Their memory will impel you to preside over the *ashram*.'

The Master led Mother Sharmi with one hand and with the other, blessed the people gathered there. ' Mother,' he said, loud enough to be heard by every one, the valiant Krupa has brought back such of the cows, and bulls as have not disappeard into the stomach of Mosa. And you know, something wonderful has happened. The tribe have expiated their sin by giving up eating human flesh or beef. Now let us have a bathe, offer our prayers to the God Surya, light the sacred fire and make offerings to the Fire God.'

Then he turned to mother Sharmi, with a boyish mischievous look. ' What do you think, Mother Sharmi ? Shall we call this "Mother Sharmi's *teerth* ?" '

Mother Sharmi was shocked at the proposal, opened her mouth wide and patted it with her fingers. Then she registered her protest and said' Me ! How can it be my *teerth*? I am a woman, I cannot chant the WORD. The *teerth* should be named after you. You must stay here and make it your home.'

' I am going to stay here for a few weeks. I have asked Kunik to fetch Jaabaaleyaa from Hastinapur. We must see that the sacred fire burns as bright as ever before and the sacred chant is chanted to perfection,' said the Master.

The Master and the *Srotriyas* took their bathe, performed *sandhya* and lit the sacred fire.

The tribesmen between themselves discussed the miracle that had been worked by the Master. The tribesmen had now no doubt that the Master was a god.

The Master, according to his vow, took his meal after he had served it to others.

After the meal, the inmates of the *ashram* got busy preparing the pen for the cows, washing them clean, and collecting fodder for them.

The tribesmen went into the forest to collect bamboos to build cottages.

Krivi and other boatmen left on their usual rounds, and wherever they halted, they talked about the miracles of the Master.

The next day, due obsequies were offered for Acharya Gautama and all those who died at the hands of Mosa's men.

CHAPTER 33

THERE IS SOMETHING IN A NAME

THE Godhuli *ashram* took a new form; it became a centre of attraction for the neighbouring *ashrams*, settlements and villages.

Men and women came to Godhuli, took a holy bathe in the river at the sacred spot where Muni Paraashara had been received by the God of Fire, worshipped the sacred fire in the *ashram* and received a *darshan* from the Master.

Hunters came to present deer-skins to the Master for the use of *Srotriyas* and to secure his blessing.

The *Srotriyas* came to join in the sacrifical session which the Master intended to perform in order to purify the *ashram*.

The Aryas and members of the guilds with their women-folk also came, bringing food by way of a present to the Master. The Master promptly distributed most of it among the visitors, tribesmen and children, and handed over what was left to Mother Sharmi.

Mother Sharmi bustled about, grumbling at the meagre food which the Master left for the inmates of the *ashram*, and also at the inmates, particularly the women-folk, for eating too much.

The Master, however, strictly adhered to his vows; he would not permit any *Srotriya* to retain foodstuff which would last for more than three days; it was for them to lead a life of austerity and serve the WORD as a living divinity.

Once, as the Master was performing the pre-dawn *sandhya* in the knee-deep waters of the Yamuna, he pondered over the miracle of his surviving Mosa's wrath; of the escape of Mother Sharmi and the other tribal women from Mosa, and of Mosa's death.

He looked at the sky; it had turned pale. The morning star shone blue; dark clouds on the horizon were dispersing.

Suddenly, through the dense curtain of clouds, a single shaft of light struck him. He understood its significance. It was a message from his guardian God Surya. With humility, he uttered the Gayatri *mantra* sacred to his God :

> " *Oh Divine Ruler, Surya* (Sun-God),
> *I adore Thy effulgence.*
> *I shall always seek Thy life-giving light.*
> *Oh, Lord, enrich and stimulate the power of our minds.*"

As he looked at the orb of molten gold emerging majestically from a cloud bank, he realized the unity which was at the heart of creation; it was so simple, though it was beyond language and beyond the mind.

The light which coursed in his veins became articulate. He heard the mandate of the God : "*Make the whole world Arya, pure, noble and united in high aspirations.*"

He felt that he was possessed. What had been given to a few ancient sages was given to him ; all the gods and the whole of creation were to be merged into One.

As he offered libation to the God Surya, his heart was full of gratitude.

Then the significance of Godhuli dawned on him. Things had to happen in the way they did because it was a hallowed spot —the spot where his father was received by the Fire God—a spot where men and women would purify themselves by taking a holy bathe in the river, recapture the inspiration of *dharma* and realise the unity of creation through worship.

As the days passed by, every one in the *ashram* was expecting the arrival of Jaabaaleyaa, the Master's spouse.

After about three weeks, a royal barge was sighted, coming over the horizon. Every one was excited—not one, but three barges were approaching !

Mother Sharmi, standing on the bank of the river, recognised the visitors with her sharp eyes and shouted : 'Jaabaaleyaa has brought the venerable Mother and the Princesses of Kashi too. Get ready, all of you, to receive them properly! '

All the men and women of the *ashram* came to the landing ground to receive the guests ceremoniously. They returned to the *ashram* in a procession, the women, with water-pots on their heads, leading it.

The Master was anxious to resume his journeyings and decided to solve the outstanding difficulties before he left.

First there was the problem of the tribal women who had escaped with Mother Sharmi. Then, there was the problem of naming the *teerth*, so that, by its very name, it would attract devotion. The third problem was the obstinacy of Sukdev in refusing to found a home.

The eligible tribal women who had sought asylum in the *ashram*, did not want to go back to tribal life. Creation was one; that was the message of the God Surya. These tribal women who wanted to live in the *ashram* should, therefore, be absorbed into one homogeneous community.

If the gods were One, so were men and women. His mother,—

the venerable Mother,—was not an Arya woman, but she was noble and devoted. Mother Sharmi was a tribal woman, but there were few Arya women as devoted and pure as she was.

Two younger sisters of Mosa refused to go back to tribal life, but wanted to live in the *ashram*. Mother Sharmi wanted them to be married to the Master's son, Sukdev, but the young Brahmachari, like his companions, refused to found a home, to become a householder (*grahasthasrami*) as required by the ancient canons, and wanted to enter directly the final stage of the *sanyasins*—ascetics.*

The next problem was also insoluble. If the mandate received by the Master from the God Surya to unify creation had to be obeyed, it could only be done through Godhuli becoming a model *ashram* and *teerth*.

They met in a conclave. The venerable Mother, graceful and dignified in spite of her age, was seated on a silver-inlaid bench, with the ever-present Daavi behind her. In front of her sat Mother Sharmi, with her resplendent crown of white hair, in a new skirt and freshly-woven woollen scarf.

On the left of the venerable Mother sat the Kashi Princesses with their mournful eyes, the very image of helplessness and Vatikaa, the Master's spouse.

On her right sat the Master. Next to him was Krupa with his headgear adorned by buffalo horns, the insignia of royalty. Sukdev with four of his companions sat behind him.

The venerable Mother said : 'I have discussed the matter with Dvaipaayana. The best of Munis, Paraashara, was received by the God of Fire at this place.'

There was a catch in her throat as her imagination recreated the events which had changed the life of Godhuli, her own life, and also the whole of Aryavarta. It was here that she, the fisher-girl, met the Pangu Muni; she nursed him to health in Kalpi nearby, and poor little girl that she was, she offered him all that she had—her body. Pangu Muni had brought Dvaipaayana to this place. Acharya Gautama had adopted him as a disciple and Mother Sharmi had brought him up as if he was her own son. The memory of these events, which also changed her life, brought tears to her eyes.

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*Note:— For a complete life, an Arya has to live in four stages : *Brahmacharya* (celibrate student); *grahastha* (of the householder) ; *vanaprastha*, (retirement from active life to spend years in meditation), and the final stage, *sanyastha*, the stage of an ascetic, without possessions and without a home, seeking self-realization.

Clearing her throat, the venerable Mother continued : 'I have talked the matter over with the Master. He has assured me that he will accept whatever name we all agree to give the *teerth*. The Gods have given a mission to Dvaipaayana to unify men and women through *teerths*. Its name is therefore important. It must evoke sacred associations.'

Then she turned to the Master. 'Now you tell us what you think we should do,' she asked him.

With a humorous twinkle in his eyes, the Master said: 'Venerable Mother, I have my own views about naming the *ashram*.'

'What is the name that you suggest ?' asked the venerable Mother.

'I am sure that, when I mention the name, all of you will disagree with me,' said the Master with a boyish smile. 'I would like to name the *ashram* after the person who has suffered the most for its sake.'

'Don't talk in riddles. Let us have the name,' said the venerable Mother.

'You will be shocked if I name the person,' said the Master. 'There she is,' he pointed a finger at Mother Sharmi.

'Mother Sharmi !' interjected the venerable Mother in shocked surprise.

Vatikaa looked angrily at her husband.

'Yes, she has done the most possible for the *ashram* and suffered the most too. She worked day and night for years to build it up. She made a success of the *Vajpeya* by playing the hostess like the Goddess Annapoorna,' said the Master.

He then paused for a moment and continued in a lighter vein : 'But her time is spent in complaining that she has not foodstuff enough to provide the whole *ashram*. From her appearance I think she is eating too much,' he laughed aloud.

Before Mother Sharmi could interrupt him, he continued : 'She brought about happy relations between the Divine Buffalo tribe and ourselves. For the sake of the *ashram*, she passed through the most distressing of experiences; she saw her husband and her children being massacred before her very eyes. Now she is going to devote her life to rebuilding the *ashram*.'

Mother Sharmi grew frantic and shouted : 'Dvaipaayana, don't talk nonsense. This is no occasion for you to talk so mischievously.'

'No, the truth of the matter is that it is the only sensible thing I have ever said in my life,' said the Master.

'I am not going to allow you to give my name to the *ashram*,' said Mother Sharmi.

'But you have done so much for the *ashram*, brought harmony between the tribesmen and its inmates,' said the Master.

'In spite of your learning, Krishna, you are as foolish now as when you were a boy,' said Mother Sharmi. Then she realized what she had done ; she saw the horror on the faces of the others at what she had said.

She patted her mouth with her fingers, a sign that she had spoken something which she should not have. 'Oh, what have I done ? I have abused the Master.'

'No. You have not abused the Master. You have only scolded your son, Krishna,' said the Master in mock humility.

Mother Sharmi looked at the Master with affection. 'Forgive me. But don't you see ? I have never been a *brahmacharini*; never mastered a chant from the WORD. Don't you realize that "my Acharya," now living in the Land of the Ancestors, would be angry with me if I allowed the *ashram* to be named after me ? If the *ashram* is named after me, it will lose its sanctity. I want this place to be a gateway to the Land of the Gods, where people can come and purify themselves. It must always remain sacred to Muni Paraashara and "my Acharya." It is their memory which gives sanctity to this place.'

'What you say is perfectly correct, Mother Sharmi,' said the Master in a persuasive way. 'Association with the venerable Muni Paraashara and Acharya Gautama will give sanctity to the *ashram*.'

'But a mere name will not do,' interrupted Mother Sharmi. 'There must be a learned Acharya as the head of the *ashram*.'

'Dvaipaayana, you are a disciple of "my Acharya" and you must become the Acharya.'

'I ! How can I live here ? My mission is to make Dharmakshetra a source of inspiration and to go from place to place, teaching *dharma* and the worship of the WORD and to lead the people to righteous living,' said the Master.

'Then if you don't become the Acharya, I will not part with Sukdev.' Her eyes grew moist. A tear dropped down. 'The Gods have taken away my sons. If they were alive, they would have carried forward the heritage of their father,' said Mother Sharmi and brushed away the tears which sprang into her eyes. 'I thought I had a son in you, Dvaipaayana. But you have no love for the Godhuli *ashram* !'

She cleared her throat and after regaining her composure said : 'If you don't become the Acharya, I will not part with Sukdev. If he forsakes me. . . .' She could not proceed further, for she was choked by emotion.

'Sukdev has created a complication,' said the venerable Mother. She looked at Sukdev who sat behind his father, modestly looking up, with a little smile on his face, enjoying the difficulties of his elders.

CHAPTER 34

"MOTHER SHARMI CANNOT BE DISOBEYED"

'IF we come to a decision about Sukdev, the other difficulties will be solved automatically,' said the venerable Mother.

An indulgent smile played on the Master's face. 'He looks so simple and modest, but can create a world of complications,' he said. 'Venerable Mother, you have to persuade him to found a home.'

'What can I do ? Jaabaaleyaa and myself tried our best to persuade him. He continues to smile irritatingly as if we were little children. He has set his heart on becoming a *sanyasi*; he does not want to found a home,' said the venerable Mother.

The venerable Mother then looked at Vatikaa, who took up the thread of the conversation. 'Sukdev is my only child,' said Vatikaa, 'and I want him to found a home. No *Srotriya* could fulfil his vocation without founding a home, according to our ancient canons. How can he save his forefathers from hell unless his sons offer obsequial offerings to them ?'

Before Vatikaa could proceed further, Mother Sharmi burst out. 'How long will you continue this endless discussion ?' She folded her arms on her chest to express finality. 'Dvaipaayana should preside over this *ashram*; failing him, Sukdev must do so. My decision is final. And Sukdev has to marry no less a person than the younger sister of Mosa, Peevaree.' She adjusted her scarf, which always had the habit of slipping off her shoulders whenever she got into a rage.

'You are all selfish,' continued Mother Sharmi. 'I am going to do what "my Acharya" would have wished me to do.' She glared first at Vatikaa and then at the venerable Mother, unfolded her hands and placed them on her hips.

Vatikaa looked at mother Sharmi angrily. She had never realised as she did now that Sharmi was such a powerful factor in her husband's life.

'Dvaipaayana was a motherless boy when I mothered him,' said Mother Sharmi. 'He is my son. Spiritually he is the son of "my Acharya".

She looked at everybody defiantly. Then overpowered by emotion, she burst into tears. 'You have made Dvaipaayana a "Master". He is required here, there and everywhere. He is too big to be spared for my *ashram*.' She regained composure and continued : 'I will not part with Sukdev. He must become a householder and marry Peevaree, the younger sister of Mosa. I have already decided it.'

Vatikaa felt deeply hurt at the monopolistic way in which Mother Sharmi was disposing of her son and said angrily : 'Mother Sharmi, don't forget that for nine months he was a part of me. I have to select a proper bride for him, not you. I have already chosen Acharya Shaunak's daughter for him.'

Mother Sharmi adjusted her hair and asked with devastating sarcasm : 'Jaabaali's daughter, where were you when Sukdev, whom you claim to be your son, was going to be killed by Mosa ? Where were you when I risked my life to bring him food, without which he would have been starved to death ? Where were you then ?' Then she replied to her queries herself : 'You were at Hastinapur, enjoying the hospitality of the venerable Mother.'

Vatikaa was going to explode, when Sukdev, though modestly looking down, was seized with a fit of laughter. The tension dissolved as the venerable Mother intervened : 'My son, what are you laughing at ?' she asked Sukdev.

Sukdev moved his head without looking up and was again shaken with uncontrollable laughter.

'What are you laughing at ?' asked the venerable Mother again.

Sukdev shook his head and with some effort to control himself, folded his hands and said : 'Forgive me, venerable Mother and all of you, but I had to burst out laughing.'

'But what are you laughing at ?' asked the venerable Mother. 'We must share the fun which you seem to enjoy all by yourself.'

Sukdev controlled his laughter with some effort and said : 'I am wondering which of these two is my mother.' He again burst into convulsive laughter. Pointing his finger at Vatikaa and Mother Sharmi, he continued : 'I am almost inclined to consider myself as a freak who has been born of two mothers.' He again laughed. '. . . . or perhaps I have no mother at all. I am puzzled. Everybody seems to claim me as a son.' He looked at the venerable Mother and laughed again.

'Don't be selfish. We want to share your enjoyment. Tell us what you are laughing at,' said the venerable Mother.

Suppressing his laughter with a great effort, Sukdev said : 'I am waiting for you, venerable Mother, to put forward your claim to be my mother and for Daavi to do the same.'

Everyone laughed. Krupa had so far remained silent throughout. He was only concerned with the matters with which his tribe was connected, particularly the marriage of the tribal women who did not want to return to the tribal settlement. But he could not resist Sukdev's remarks and burst into a peal of laughter.

When the laughter subsided, the venerable Mother turned to the problem before them. 'Let us be serious now,' she said.

After a little pause, she continued : 'Don't be obstinate, my son', she said. 'Your father's tradition must be kept alive, and who can do it better than yourself ? Acharya Gautama looked upon you as his son; so does Mother Sharmi. It is also due to them that you should be the Acharya of this *ashram*.'

'I don't want to found a home,' replied Sukdev respectfully but firmly.

There was a kindly smile on the face of the venerable Mother. 'My son, young men always want to do things in their own way, but what they *ought* to do first is to see that they carry forward the heritage of their father.'

Sukdev was her grandson and she also could not look with equanimity at the possible extinction of the Muni's direct line.

Sukdev was going to reply, but before he could do so, the venerable Mother continued : 'You are the only one who can maintain the tradition of Muni Paraashara and Acharya Gautama, and carry forward the high tradition of your father.'

Sukdev folded his hands and sought permission of the venerable Mother to speak.

'You may speak frankly, my son', replied the venerable Mother. 'You know very well what we want you to do. Why are you so obstinate ?'

'I am not being obstinate', replied Sukdev. 'I want to forswear founding a home because I want to place Father's heritage on a firm footing.'

'But, how can you carry forward your father's heritage if you become an ascetic at your age ?' asked the venerable Mother.

'Venerable Mother, please forgive me if I say what we five think about the matter,' said Sukdev, folding his hands in respect.

'You may, my son', said the venerable Mother.

Sukdev, in a low, apologetic voice, said : 'Like the Divine Boar, Father has lifted *dharma* out of chaos. He has redacted the WORD, made it immaculate, organized the *Srotriyas* by giving them a new message. Whomsoever he touches becomes noble and inspiring. He is the darling of the Gods; he is under the protection of the God Surya. He can penetrate the hearts of men and light the sacred fire there. He has many times vanquished the God of Death by his healing touch. We five have thought of this matter over and over again.'

'That is why we want you to carry forward the heritage of your father,' said the venerable Mother.

'We are doing just that,' said Sukdev. When the venerable Father leaves for the Land of the Ancestors, the *Srotriya* will lose his inspiration; he will cease to hearken to the message of the WORD which the venerable Father lives for :

> '*There can be no achievement without self-discipline;*
> *No future without dedication;*
> *No creation without sacrifice.*'

The dead earnestness with which Sukdev spoke created a deep impression on the others. 'May I continue ?' he asked the venerable Mother.

'Yes, by all means,' replied the venerable Mother.

'A householder's life is weighted with a wife and children, with *ashrams* and cows, with the favour of the wealthy and the powerful. In course of time the householder will forswear *tapas*. Only a band of ascetics who have given up the world in order to save it can keep the flame of *tapas* alive.'

'What about you, brahmacharis ?' asked the Master of the other four companions of Sukdev.

'We will follow Sukdev in whatever he does,' replied one of them. 'We have taken a pledge to build *dharma* by becoming walking *ashrams*.'

'How ?' asked the venerable Mother.

'The heart of the ascetic, so long as it beats, will be the sacred fire; its flame will then be passed on to generations unborn.'

Sukdev intervened. 'We have already told you of our aspiration, Father. You are a god to us; we are pledged to accept your decision. We place our lives at your feet.'

'What a son the Gods have given me ! I can see his ascetic disciples, age after age, keeping the flame of *dharma* alive,' said the Master.

Everyone looked at the Master, expecting him to give the final decision.

Then he paused and continued : 'It is the association with the Best of Munis, Paraashara, that gives sanctity to this *teerth*.'

Then he smiled and continued : 'The more I see of Mother Sharmi, the firmer becomes my view that she is the Goddess Annapoorna herself. She has no vanity. She does not like the *ashram* to be associated with her name.'

The master paused and spoke with rare solemnity : 'When the Paraashara *ashram* was reduced to ashes by the wicked king, Sahasrarjuna, Acharya Gautama single-handed built up this *ashram*, facing great danger at every moment. If it has flourished, it was because of his blessing. If the name of the Acharya is associated with this *ashram*, it will flourish so long as the sun and the moon endure.'

'Now you are talking sense,' interrupted Mother Sharmi, all smiles, and turning to Vatikaa triumphantly, she said : 'See, that is my son speaking.'

'When I was very young,' said the Master, 'I wanted to become the Acharya of this *ashram* and had taken a pledge to restore the Field of Ashes.'

'Now you are so mature that you cannot keep your pledge, can you ?' asked mother Sharmi sarcastically.

'I must discharge my debt to my spiritual father,' replied the Master. 'Every year I will spend two months here, but I will not be its Acharya.'

After a pause, the Master continued : 'I entirely agree with all of you that Sukdev should found a home; then he could be installed as the Acharya of this *ashram*.'

Sukdev felt miserable. His father's verdict was going to be against him.

'It is Sukdev's responsibility to be the Acharya of this *ashram*. He must therefore have a wife as his *sahadharmachari* —his comrade in righteous living. A *Srotriya* cannot evade founding a home. What do you say, Sukdev ?' asked the Master.

Sukdev felt completely lost. He had hoped that his father would appreciate his point of view, but he bowed low and with folded hands, said : 'Father, I will obey your commands.' There was a choking sensation in his throat.

'Now, let us consider what we can do about your marriage,' said the Master.

'Father, please don't choose a wife for me,' interjected Sukdev piteously. 'Give me time to think.'

Vatikaa in despair placed her hands over her forehead and turned to the Master. 'Aryaputra, please, please, postpone your decision, I beg of you. I cannot bear the unhappiness of seeing my only son married to a tribes-woman. How would my father, the revered Jaabaali, regard it ?'

With his boyish smile, the Master remarked : 'Mother Sharmi is a tribes-woman too. She has dedicated her life to Acharya Gautama as well as to the *ashram*. It is no use postponing the matter, Jaabaaleyaa. Postponement will only lead to further misery.'

'But, where is the haste ?' asked Vatikaa.

'Jaabaaleyaa, many things are at stake. We have to absorb the tribesmen into our fold; re-build the Gautama *ashram* as a model for other *ashrams*; preserve the sanctity of the Paraashara *teerth*,' said the Master.

The Master paused for a moment. Then he continued: 'We have also to consider the effect of what we do on the Aryas, Nagas and tribesmen. I have been given a mandate by the God Surya :

> "*Make the whole world Arya,*
> *Pure, noble and united in high aspirations*".'

Vatikaa had a choking sensation in her throat.

The Master continued: 'Jaabaaleyaa, our lives should be lived as directed by the Gods, not by us imperfect human beings.'

Then the Master turned to Krupa who was sitting like a statue, watching everyone. 'Valiant Krupa, will you, as the chief of the Divine Buffalo tribe, allow the younger sister of Mosa, Peevaree, to be married to Sukdev ? The other young women of your tribe, if willing, can be married to the others.'

'Master, I have thought over the matter and talked it over with the elders of my tribe. I entirely agree with Mother Sharmi. We cannot live an isolated life,' replied Krupa.

'Well, then, we all agree that Sukdev ought to marry Peevaree after she has gone through the *chandrayana vrata*—the necessary purificatory ritual,' said the Master.

In distress, Sukdev placed his hands over his face.

'Sukdev, don't feel distressed,' continued the Master. 'I appreciate what you have been trying to do. You want to strengthen the heritage which the God Surya has given me to build. Let us agree that after you have had four sons, each one specialising in one of the sections of the WORD, you will be free to become a *sanyasi* if you like and if Peevaree consents, and organize an order of *sanyasins* who will carry forward the heritage of the WORD.'

Sukdev was so distressed that he did not remove his hands from his face. He almost sobbed. All that he had dreamt of for himself was destroyed.

Mother Sharmi was laughing and crying at the same time. She stretched out her hand and twisted Sukdev's ear. 'Now, my son, listen. Come here,' she said and removed the hands which Sukdev had placed over his face to hide his frustration.

She pulled Sukdev a little towards her. 'Learn your lesson properly,' she said with an affectionate smile, her eyes dancing in merriment. Twisting his ear again, she said : 'Mother Sharmi cannot be disobeyed.'

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CHAPTER 35

ENTER SHAKUNI

AFTER the marriage of Sukdev with Peevaree, the venerable Mother, Vatikaa and the Kashi princesses left the Godhuli *ashram* for Hastinapur. The Master and his disciples resumed their journeyings.

The Mother had been deeply distressed at the situation developing in Hastinapur after her sons, Chitrangada and Vichitraveerya, had been taken away by the God of Death, both leaving no son.

In spite of all her efforts to strengthen the House of the Kurus, calamities, one after another, continued to thwart them. The more she thought of these difficulties, the greater was her frustration.

To perpetuate the line of the Emperor Shantanu, she had induced her son, Muni Dvaipaayana (the Master) to beget sons on the two Kashi princesses, the widows of Vichitraveerya, by *Niyoga*.

She had hoped her worries would end with the birth of sons to Ambika and Ambaalika.

Dhritaraashtra, Ambika's son, was sturdy, but being born blind from birth, neither he nor his heirs could succeed to the throne, according to the ancient canons.

With great reluctance, Sabal, the King of Gandhara, gave his daughter, Gandhari in marriage to the blind Dhritaraashtra. Before the wedding, Sabal had stipulated that Gandhari's brother, Shakuni, should stay at Hastinapur to look after the interests of the princess and her children. It was a very humiliating concession, but that was the only way to secure the hand of Gandhari for Dhritaraashtra.

Pandu was installed King of Hastinapur, and in spite of his delicate health, ruled the Kurus, for some time with strength and vigour.

He had been trained by Grandfather Bheeshma in the art of statecraft and war, according to the best tradition of his *guru*, the mighty Parashu Raama (Rama of the Battle Axe).

In view of the misfortunes that had overtaken the Kuru Royal House, many tributaries had shaken off its sovereignty. In a swift military campaign, however, Pandu reminded them that the Kurus were all-powerful and recaptured their allegiance.

Pandu was married to Prithaa, the sister of Vasudeva, the powerful Yadava chief, and the adopted daughter of King Kuntibhoj (hence called Kunti), and also to princess Maadri, sister of Salya, King of Madra.

An unexpected and painful tragedy overshadowed the fortunes of the Kuru family. Pandu was under a curse; he could not beget children. Kunti loved children and was horrified to find that she would have no children of her own.

The venerable Mother and Gangeya, who was now universally referred to as "Bheeshma, the Grandfather," in despair, turned to the Master for advice. The Master advised that Kunti and Maadri should beget children by *Niyoga* seeking unity with the Gods in accordance with the ancient canons.*

Pandu, oppressed by a sense of futility, retired to the Himalayas with his wives to spend a secluded life.

Kunti, with the consent of her husband, begot by *Niyoga* three sons—Yudhisthira, Bheema and Arjuna, and Maadri, the twins, Nakula and Sahadev.

When this information reached Vasudeva, the powerful Yadava chief and brother of Kunti, he sent presents for all the Five Brothers, accepting them as the sons of Pandu, and so did Maadri's father, the King of Madra.

Dhritaraashtra, by Gandhaari, begot several sons, the eldest of whom was named Duryodhana, and the next one, Dushaashan.

Dhritaraashtra, though weak and vaccilating, felt deeply hurt at his supersession on account of his congenital blindness. But the canon was clear —he could not succeed. However, he was anxious that Duryodhana, his eldest son, should be installed as Crown Prince and succeed to the throne of the Kurus. He thought—and rightly—that if the Five Brothers were accepted, the eldest, Yudhishthira, would be entitled to the throne.

Bheeshma, the grand old man, entered the Audience Chamber; he was dressed in silk and wore a coronet on his head. The chamberlain who preceded him, stood near the throne. The Minister-in-Waiting followed him and posted himself near the throne. The fair-skinned chamaries (whisk-bearers), brought from foreign lands, had been standing like statues carved in marble, but now they sprang into action.

Shakuni, who had asked for an interview, stood up, folded his hands and touched Bheeshma's feet.

Shakuni was a lean, tall man with a receding forehead and deep-set eyes. He was dressed in silk, wore gold ornaments on his

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*Vide Chapter No. 7, *Krishnavatara*, Vol. I, '*Magic Flute*'.

wrists and arms and a gorgeous necklace. He also wore a small diadem and a short sword which was suspended from his waistband, both indicating his royal descent.

After Bheeshma had taken his seat on the throne, the chamberlain stepped back and stood by the door. Bheeshma looked at Shakuni; his brilliant eyes flashed in a way which always commanded awesome respect. By a gesture, he dismissed the chamaries and invited Shakuni to take his seat on a low throne near him—another privilege accorded to Shakuni as the son of a king.

Bheeshma had disliked Shakuni from the time the latter had come to live in Hastinapur; he was always promoting intrigues. Now he was working up some Kuru leaders to persuade him, Bheeshma, not to accept the Five Brothers as the sons of Pandu. Like Dhritaraashtra, he and his father, King Sabal of Gandhaara, had hoped that Pandu would die childless and Duryodhana would succeed to the throne of the Kurus. Now that hope would be gone if the Five Brothers were accepted as the sons of Pandu.

'I hope that King Sabal, your noble father, is in good health,' said Bheeshma.

Shakuni felt unnerved by the extremely formal manner in which he was being received by Bheeshma. Folding his hands in respect, he said : 'My noble father is quite well. I have come to deliver his message to the Best of Kurus.'

Bheeshma steadily looked at Shakuni and after a pause, asked : 'What is the message ?'

For a moment Shakuni felt nervous; he re-adjusted his scarf, gathering self-composure. He did not like to face the old man in his present mood, but there was no help. He decided to go straight to the point.

'My noble father hopes that, now that King Pandu of glorious memory has gone to the Land of the Ancestors, Duryodhana, the eldest son of Dhritaraashtra, will be installed as King.'

Bheeshma was silent for a moment. Then he abruptly asked : 'Is there anything more ?'

'My noble father has a profound veneration for you, Best of Kurus, and feels confident that you will do justice to noble Duryodhana,' said Shakuni.

'Has your noble father suggested in which way justice should be done—to the Five Brothers as well as to Duryodhana and his brothers ?' asked Bheeshma.

'My noble father has commanded me to convey to the Best of Kurus that, even if the Five Brothers are accepted as the sons of King Pandu, the noble Duryodhana shall be secure in his position as Pandu's successor.'

Bheeshma did not reply for a while. Then he asked : 'Do you wish to say anything more ?'

'Nothing more, Best of Kurus,' replied Shakuni.

'Naturally my noble and valiant father will expect a reply to his message.'

Without replying to his question, Bheeshma asked Shakuni : 'Have you been seeking the aid of some of the Kuru Elders to oppose the acceptance of the Five Brothers as the sons of King Pandu?'

Shakuni found it difficult to answer so forthright a question. 'I did not seek them out for that purpose,' he replied apologetically.

'Perhaps they sought you out of themselves, did they ?'

Shakuni evaded a straight reply. 'They are all feeling anxious lest you may accept the Five Brothers as the sons of Pandu and install Yudhishthira as King.'

'You met some *Srotriyas* also,' asserted Bheeshma. The statement was like a bolt from the blue. Shakuni had made secret approaches to some eminent *Srotriyas*; evidently Bheeshma had come to know of it.

'I only wanted to understand from the learned *Srotriyas* whether, under the circumstances, Duryodhana could succeed to the throne, according to the ancient canons,' replied Shakuni.

'Have you met the Worship-worthy Acharya Vibhuti, our former *Purohit*, and Acharya Bharadwaja, the present *Purohit* ?' asked Bheeshma.

'No, I have not,' replied Shakuni.

'Then you had better discuss the ancient canons with them,' said Bheeshma. He added as if speaking to himself: 'But he would be a strange *Srotriya* who would challenge the opinion of the *Vidhvat Sansad* of Dharmakshetra on the interpretation of the ancient canons, approved by the Master himself.'

'What is the opinion of the Master, may I know ?' asked Shakuni and muttered to himself: 'What *Srotriyas* would dare to challenge the Master ?'

Bheeshma said as if reciting a decree : 'Pandu was the last sovereign lord of the Kurus; on his death, his sons are entitled to the privileges and status which he enoyed when he was alive.'

Shakuni's smile was ingratiating. 'Best of Kurus, no one in Aryavarta can challenge the authority of the Master in the matter of the canons. But who knows better than the Best of Kurus that canons have to be considered in the light of changing circumstances. May I be explicit ?' he asked, trying to find a way to mollify the old man.

'Yes, I have not stopped you from speaking,' replied Bheeshma dryly.

'Allied as the Gandhaaras are with the Kurus in firm friendship, my noble father would like the best of Kurus to reconsider his decision,' said Shakuni.

Then he thought for a while, folded his hands and as persuasively as he could, added : 'My noble father entertains the hope that the friendship of the noble King of Gandhaara will be of great value to him'.

'Don't go round and round the question. Tell me plainly. Does your father want to impose his choice on us ?' asked Bheeshma, his eyes pinned on Shakuni's face.

Shakuni was going to disown any such intention, when Bheeshma, by a gesture, asked him not to interrupt him. 'Convey to your noble father,' he said, keeping his rising impatience under control, 'that Bheeshma requires no assistance in exercising the Kuru power.'

'No, no, no,' said Shakuni nervously. 'My noble father does not want to interfere in the affairs of the Kurus.'

In a tone of authority, Bheeshma continued : 'Convey to your noble father that Bheeshma has decided to accept the Five Brothers as the sons of the noble King Pandu and they will be given all the privileges and status that the late King enjoyed during his lifetime.' Then he added : 'If attempts are made to interfere in the affairs of the Kurus, they will be met with all the Kuru's strength and the strength of their allies.' There was thunder in his voice.

The chamberlain approached Bheeshma with folded hands, waiting to be permitted to speak. 'Lord, the boat bringing the Master is sighted,' he said. 'Very shortly, the Master will disembark.'

'All right. Inform the venerable Mother that I will bring the Master to her immediately, unless she is too tired to receive us.'

Bheeshma rose from his throne, his brows knit, acknowledging the salutation of Shakuni by a nod, and went towards the door.

Shakuni's father had instructed him not to push the matter so far as to involve himself in an open conflict with the Kurus. Meekly, therefore, he said : 'Lord, I go away disappointed.'

Half-way towards the door, Bheeshma stood, turned round, and looking at Shakuni, said : 'I expect that you will leave for Gandhaara within three days to convey my message to your noble father.'

Shakuni realised that it was not a request, but a mandate and bowed with folded hands to indicate that he would obey the mandate.

Bheeshma, led by the chamberlain, left the Audience Chamber.

CHAPTER 36

THE MASTER'S MISSION

THE venerable Mother had had high hopes that some day Pandu would come out of the seclusion which he had imposed upon himself and resume the responsibilities of a Kuru Emperor. Now that he was dead, she felt frustrated, broken and crushed.

Hastinapur was developing into a centre of internecine dissensions. Her expectation of Pandu's restoring the greatness of Hastinapur as in the days of the Emperor Shantanu, had foundered. Her courage ebbed away; she fell ill, and Grandfather Bheeshma sent word to the Master to come to Hastinapur immediately, which the Master did.

When the Master, accompanied by Bheeshma, came to the mansion of the Mother, she was lying in her bed, her eyes swollen, her face red, her skin hot. Assisted by Daavi, she sat up in her bed and blessed the Master when he touched her feet.

Bheeshma, meticulous about decorum, also touched the feet of the Mother. By a gesture, she asked them to be seated.

She closed her eyes for a moment and then said: 'Krishna, this blow is very severe.' She added in a choking voice: ' I can't bear it.' Tears coursed down her cheeks.

'Krishna, come and sit near me. I have been waiting for you all these days. The Great God alone knows how long I will live, but I want to die.'

She felt exhausted. Then she murmured as if to herself: 'I strove faithfully to carry out the wishes of the august Aryaputra, but I have failed, hopelessly failed.' She was shaken by sobs and buried her face in the pillow.

In a weak voice, she added: 'I have lived in vain. I could not present my lord with capable and long-lived sons.'

Then she turned to Bheeshma and asked: 'Gangeya, have you told everything to Dvaipaayana ?'

'I have, Mother. I have told him everything', replied Bheeshma.

' What is your view, Dvaipaayana ? ' asked the venerable Mother.

' The decision taken by the noble Gangeya is the right one', said the Master. 'He and the Kuru Elders both agreed that the wives of noble King Pandu should beget sons by *Niyoga*. That itself carries the pledge that the Kuru Elders themselves will accept the Five Brothers as the sons of Pandu.'

'That is true', said Bheeshma. 'We are already pledged to accept the Five Brothers as the sons of Pandu, and naturally Yudhishthira will be Crown Prince.'

'What about the Kuru Elders ?' asked the venerable Mother.

'Most of them are for accepting the Five Brothers as the sons of Pandu', replied Bheeshma.

'You told me that Shakuni met you a little while before I came. What did he say ?' asked the Master.

With a little smile of contempt, Bheeshma said: 'He had come to put pressure on me; he did it cleverly. He said that he had brought a message from his father, asking us not to accept the Five Brothers, and even if we did, at any rate to install Duryodhana as King. He also admitted that he had consulted some eminent *Srotriyas* to find out whether Duryodhana was entitled to succeed to the throne.'

'How did the *Srotriyas* come to support Duryodhana's claim ?' asked the Master.

'I think he was trying to deceive me', replied Bheeshma. 'All the *Srotriyas* of Hastinapur support the view of our former Purohit, Acharya Vibhuti, and the present one, Acharya Bharadwaja, that Yudhishthira's claim is unassailable. They have behind them the opinion of the *Vidvat Sabha* of Dharmakshetra on the interpretation of the ancient canons, approved by yourself.'

'The Five Brothers are the sons of the last of the Kuru Kings and it is the birth-right of the eldest to succeed his father,' said the Master. He paused for a moment and asked : 'What did you tell Shakuni, noble Gangeya ?'

'I had no patience with that dirty intriguer,' replied Bheeshma. 'I told him that the Five Brothers would receive all the privileges and status befitting the sons of the late King Pandu.'

The venerable Mother opened her eyes and, assisted by Daavi, again sat up in her bed and said: 'It is Gangeya's strength which keeps the Kurus together. The root cause of all our difficulties is Shakuni. He should be removed from Hastinapur.'

'Mother, you are right. Shakuni is at the bottom of all the mischief,' said Bheeshma. 'But we cannot shake him off. Dhritaraashtra would never reconcile himself to his being driven away. It would also mean a mortal affront to King Sabal. Mother, don't trouble yourself about Shakuni. The Kurus can take care of him.'

'If there were a conflict now', continued Bheeshma, 'it would not merely be a skirmish; it would be a war in which many kings would be involved. Duryodhana would be supported by King Sabal, and possibly by the lords of Karush and of Chedi; even Mathura might join in. The Five Brothers are sure to be supported by

Kunti's brother, Vaasudeva, the Yadava chief, her adopted father, King Kuntibhoj, and perhaps by Drupad, the lord of Panchala.'

'How would this affect the Kuru ladies, Mother ?' asked the Master.

'All those whom I have met support the Five Brothers,' replied the venerable Mother. She paused and closed her eyes. After a few moments, she murmured as if to herself: 'I nursed the ambition that I would strengthen the Kuru power. I did not know that I was a foolish woman who lived on dreams.'

' Don't talk like that, Mother', said the Master, gently placing his hand on her feverish brow. 'You have been a tower of strength to the noble Gangeya, for your hold on the Kurus rests on their affection for you.' He paused and continued. 'I agree with you that Shakuni would be a danger if Yudhishthira were accepted as Crown Prince.'

The venerable Mother said: ' Shakuni is like a tiny worm which can work its way into a powerful tree and bring it down. What is the way that you suggest, Krishna ? You are concerned with Kuru power as much as any of us.'

'We are on the brink of a precipice, Mother,' said the Master. 'Let us be clear between ourselves as to where I stand. I support the Kuru power for reasons of my own.'

' What are those reasons ? Let us know, ' said the venerable Mother.

The Master looked at the sunshine which was streaming through the door. ' You have asked me for the reasons of my giving support to the Kuru power. I will tell you, but don't be disappointed. I have not up till now disclosed them so clearly to anyone else. I support the Kuru power because in the noble Gangeya, *brahma-tej* is allied to *kshatra-tej* and because I look forward to a Kuru Chakravarti (Emperor) ruling in Aryavarta, pledged to *dharma*, whose moral authority will be irresistible. If I don't find such a one among the Kurus, I shall have to seek him elsewhere'.

He paused and, in a voice full of humility, continued: 'Despite my God Surya has given me the power and influence to strengthen *dharma*, which I never anticipated. *Ashrams* are multiplying. Faith in the WORD has been restored; it is studied by numberless *Srotriyas*. A new generation of learned *Srotriyas* has sprung up, who accept the standard of life which I have upheld. I have in some measure, helped in spreading righteous living.'

' Where are we to find such a Chakravarti ? ' asked the venerable Mother and sighed. 'My son, if he had been alive, might have been one, but he is gone.' She wiped the tears from her eyes. 'You don't realise my difficulties, Krishna,' she added. 'I am at the end of my strength.'

'I do,' replied the Master. 'But that is no reason for giving up the struggle. I have adored you, worshipped you, Mother, not because I am your son, but because of the wonderful way in which you have exerted a moral influence over the life of the people of Hastinapur.'

He paused, looked at the door through which sunshine was streaming and his attitude became humble. 'But, hereafter, things will be different. As I see the future, Hastinapur will be split into warring camps. *Dharma* will be forgotten. Rivalry between men will lead to bloodshed. And who can say now who will emerge as the victor— a god or a demon ?'

'Today you are very despairing, Krishna,' said the venerable Mother. 'Generally you look forward to the future with confidence.'

'Internal conflict between the Kurus is sure to divide the whole world,' said the Master.

'Is there no other way to prevent it, Dvaipaayana ?' asked Bheeshma.

'I clearly see that, if the power of Hastinapur has to play its role, the new Emperor will have to become the embodiment of *brahma-tej* and *kshatra-tej* whose moral authority will be felt all over the world,' said the Master.

He was silent for a moment and then continued: 'Shakuni is like the poison in the throat of Lord Shiva; it cannot be spat out nor swallowed.'

'You are right when you say that we are on the brink of a precipice,' said the venerable Mother in a low voice.

'Mother, let us face misfortunes as they come,' said the Master. 'Possibly the Gods will show us a way out of our difficulties.'

The venerable Mother held up her hand in despair. 'But how can I live in an atmosphere of intrigues, unable to take sides, unable to win people's confidence, unable to stand effectively for righteous living ?'

'I will tell you how you can do it, Mother,' replied the Master. 'Retire to the Paraashara *ashram* with the Kashi princesses, Ambikaa and Ambalikaa. People in Hastinapur will shed tears when you leave, and those tears will strengthen the bond which exists between you and your people. When you are removed from the centre of intrigues, your moral authority will become greater. People will realize that you are indispensable. If there is bloodshed, you will be a silent spectator, but ultimately when they see the futility of wars, they will come to you for strength.'

The venerable Mother thought for a while. 'Very well, Krishna. I will do so,' she said with a deep sigh.

'Suppose neither Hastinapur nor any other power brings forth a Chakravarti as the protector of *dharma*. What must be done ?' asked the venerable Mother.

' I am not unmindful of the danger, ' replied the Master. "But till I am called away by the Gods, I will live for *dharma*. And if the Kurus do not bring forth a Chakravarti, the God Surya will direct my steps to one born to be a

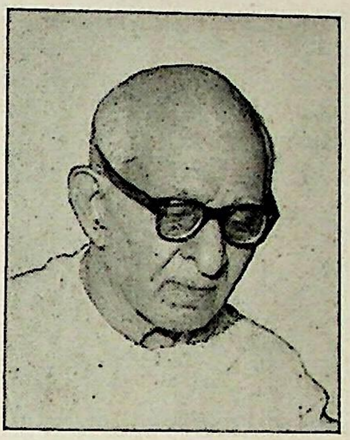
> *Sasvat-dharma-gopta, a protector of eternal dharma,*
> *who will root out the wicked and re-establish dharma.*
> *This will happen, I am sure.*

Ashram
BANARAS.

GLOSSARY

Adhvaryu—The chief priest
Agni—Fire God
Annapurna—The Goddess of food
Apsara—Celestial damsel
Aryaputra—Honorific designation of a husband by his wife
Ashram—An abode of ascetics; a sylvan school for imparting learning in scriptures, sacrificial lore and martial sciences
Aswamedha—Horse sacrifice performed by a King when he attains imperial status
Atirathi—Chariot-warrior of the highest rank
Brahmaa—One of the priests who takes part in a ritual
Brahmachari—Celibate
Brahmacharini—Female celibate
Brahmacharya—The stage of a student; Celibacy
Brahma muhurta—Eearly hours of morning
Brahma-tej—Spiritual radiance
Brahma vidya—Knowledge of ultimate Reality
Chakravarti—An emperor
Chandrayana vrata—Spiritual Discipline which involves gradual fasting in accordance with the waning and waxing moon
Danda—A staff
Darbha—A kind of sacred grass used at religious ceremonies
Darshan—Sight of divine or highly respected persons
Dhanurdhars—The archers
Dharma—Just or righteous act
Dhoti—Long garment worn by men
Dvija—Brahmin
Gayatri—Sacred mantra used in daily prayer
Ghatika—Twenty-four minutes
Gotra—Clan name
Grahasthasramam—The stage of a householder
Guru—Spiritual guide
Homa—Spiritual oblations offered in a fire
Hota—One of the priests in the ritual
Kaupina—Loin cloth
Kshatra-tej—Valiant countenance
Kshatra Dharma—Statesmanship
Kshatriyas—Members of the military caste
Kum-kum—Red turmeric powder applied to the forehead
Maharathi—A chariot-warrior of the rank subordinate to an *Atirathi*

Mantra—Esoteric word
Mantra-vidya—Esoteric science
Matru-bandhu—Brothers or cousins on the maternal side
Muni—An ascetic of the highest order
Niyoga—Appointed task or duty
Pancha-kalyani—A cow with five auspicious marks and a tufts of white hair
Pata—Magic herb
Purohit—Priest
Rajasuya—A great sacrifice performed by a monarch as a mark of his undisputed sovereignty
Rakshasas—Demons
Rathi—One who is proficient in chariot-warfare
Rishis—Seers of the Vedic hymns
Rita—The Cosmic Order
Rudraksha—A type of bead
Sadhu-sadhu—Well done, well done
Sahadharmachari—Spouce
Sandhya—The morning and evening prayers of a Brahmana
Sannyasi—One who has renounced the world
Sanyastha—One who has renounced
Satyapratijna—Truth incarnate
Shishya—Disciple
Shraut Satra—Twelve-year session
Srotriya—One who adheres to Vedic discipline
Swayamvara—The ceremony of self-choosing; a gathering of princes in which a princess selects a husband
Tapas—Penance
Tejas—Radiant Countenance
Tirtha—Place of pilgrimage
Trayi vidya—Vedic study
Udgata—One of the four principal priests at a sacrifice
Vajpeya—Spiritual discipline lasting for 17 days
Vedi—A platform or pit in which sacrifice is performed
Vrata—Religious discipline
Vidvat Sansad—Conference of Scholars
Yajnopavita—Sacred thread
Yatu vidya—Sorcery
Yupa—The post to which the sacrificial animal is tied in a ritual
Yuvaraj—Crown prince



THE AUTHOR

KANAIYALAL MANEKLAL MUNSHI's versatility and achievements are unique. He is an eminent lawyer, one of the framers of India's Constitution and a seasoned statesman. Coming under the inspiring influence of Sri Aurobindo during his student days, Munshi has been an ardent fighter for India's freedom, working at different stages in close association with Jinnah, Tilak, Besant, Mahatma Gandhi, Sardar Patel and Pandit Nehru. His achievements as Home Minister of Bombay in 1937, as India's Agent-General in Hyderabad before the Police Action, as India's Food Minister and as Governor of Uttar Pradesh have been characterised by rare courage and decisive energy.

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